

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 810

EA 023 143

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TITLE Dealing with Difficult People: A Guide for Educators.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 81p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Effectiveness; Communication Skills; *Conflict Resolution; *Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; *Intergroup Relations; *Leadership Styles; Parent Grievances; Parent Teacher Conferences; *Public Relations; Supervisory Methods; Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

Guidelines for improving educators' leadership styles in interacting and communicating with difficult people are described in this paper. Part 1, an introduction, discusses general conflict management techniques for teachers and administrators, some of which include problem prevention, listening, and understanding verbal/nonverbal messages. Suggestions for administrators in dealing with teachers, parents, Asian and other minority parents, and students are presented in the second part. Part 3 addresses teachers' relationships with parents, peers, administrators, and students, providing strategies for the parent-teacher conference and dealing with drop-in and minority parents. The conclusion offers 10 recommendations based on shared communication and consistent leadership. (40 references) (LMI)

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DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE:

A Guide For Educators

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DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE:

A GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

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FORWARD

During my 18 years as an elementary, middle and high school teacher and administrator, and during my 6 years of working with headquarters personnel and leaders in the Army, I became aware of some general practices and trends among those who were most effective in dealing with difficult people. I did not always follow those examples, but I rarely made the same mistake twice.

My dealings with parents, teachers, students and community members of all nationalities and backgrounds while working in American International Schools and in schools in the U.S. made me realize that dealing effectively with difficult people is a crucial art (if not a science) if we, as educators, are to perform the important task of educating children in this fast-changing world. All of the professional materials say to "eliminate the obstacles to learning". That is easier said than done. We must first learn to deal with difficult people if we are to be free to carry on the planning task of educating young minds.

The number of people who were effective in dealing with difficult people and from whom I stole countless ideas are too numerous to mention here, but there are some who have been my mentors for a number of years. Dr. Harry K. Wong, Sister Carmel O'Keeffe, Dr. Thomas Ellinger, Mrs. Cynthia Farley, SMAJ Lee R. Brown (ret.) and, especially my father, Angelo B. Rucci, have been examples for the materials in this monograph. I thank them for their inspiration and example.

Richard B. Rucci,

University of Vermont (Burlington) June 1991

INTRODUCTION

Dealing With Difficult People

Whether it is with students, their parents, administrators, teachers or board members, we all have the unavoidable task of occasionally dealing with difficult people. I do not consider myself the expert, nor do I have 100% accuracy in dealing with these people, but I will seldom make the same miserable mistake twice. Over the years I have watched and recorded the ways that successful and effective people have dealt with difficult people. I have collected a large file of writings that shed light on the subject and I would like to share some of the thoughts about this topic with educators. Hopefully, this will aid them in better dealing with these difficult people, whether they are "aggressives", "passive resistors" or just plain angry people.

In most situations, educational leaders must analyze the people and environment, adapt their personal leadership style and communication style to the demands of the situation and the level of "readiness" of the person with whom they are dealing. In nearly every case or situation brought out in the following pages, communication, right or wrong, is at the crux of the matter. Successful dealing with difficult people will, therefore rely on learning and relearning special communication skills and diagnosing the situation so as to keep one from getting into hot water. Within communication skills, I include listening skills. The degree of difficulty with which we deal with others very often relates to the manner in which we internalize or react to something the other person says or does. So learning to effectively deal with difficult people may also be dealing with ourselves effectively.

Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin is author of a series of books on verbal self-defense. She has written some startlingly basic,

yet very appropriate suggestions and advice when dealing with verbal abuse. She recently wrote a short article in a monthly "privileged information" magazine called *Bottom Line* (Vol. 12, No. 8, Apr. 30, 91) "We can't always avoid hostility and conflict, but we can learn to use language to deflect a verbal attack and spare ourselves mental and physical strain." Her most important and poignant advice is to relieve ourselves of potential stress by "...learning not to get hooked into other peoples's hostility....Remember that nobody can fight alone. If you refuse to fight, even the most hostile verbal attacker will give up." If you do not remember anything else from this monograph, I hope that you will remember that statement.

Muriel Solomon has written a very appropriate and informative book called *Working With Difficult People* (Prentice-Hall) which very specifically covers all situations for all levels of interaction of people in daily work and association. She describes situations with various categories of different emotional types:

Hostile/Angry People	Pushy/Presumptuous People
Difficult/Underhanded	Shrewd/Manipulative
Rude/Abrasive	Egotistical/Self-Centered
Rigid/Tight-Lipped	Complaining/Critical

Within these categories, the author also discusses sub-categories and gives samples of "What You're Thinking", "Strategy", and "Tactical Talk". Over fifty different "types" are explained, some of which are:

Hotheads	Enviars	Intimidators
Hypocrites	Forked Tongues	Back Stabbers
Bootlickers	Rumor Mongers	Snippy Talkers
Yakitty-Yakkers	Know-it-alls	Icebergs
Blame Shifters	Whiners	Martyrs

I list some of these in the hopes that educators can see that they, too, are dealing with a variety of "Difficult People". Unfortunately, people in a service-connected, public position, can not always afford to "turn-off" the person with whom they are interacting at a particular time, especially if it is with a parent or community member. For educators there must be a calm and appropriate way to deal with those listed above or the

results could be devastating to a large number of people especially children and teachers.

I have categorized the information from the standpoint of administrators and teachers in dealing with parents, teachers, students, board members and other community members. I have included an ~~annotated~~ bibliography at the end of the narrative so that those interested in pursuing more, direct information on the topic may do so.

I hope that this monograph will help educators to reflect on their own leadership style^s and to better deal with difficult people and to communicate more effectively, directly and fairly.

Giver versus Receiver

In dealing with difficult people, everyone must remember that "it takes two to tango"....or maybe tangle! Difficult people usually affect more than just the person with whom they are dealing at a particular moment. They can destroy a productive atmosphere and positive school climate in just seconds. We must remember that we will not always be able to "cure" or "fix" the difficult person's behavior, but we can at least establish ways to cope with it.

We must ask ourselves an important question: "Are we adding to the negative atmosphere in the way that we are dealing with this person?" "Is our method of reaction causing the difficulty to increase?" The person on the "receiving end" of a difficult situation can, by several strategies turn the situation around, further inflame it or at least cope with it.

Problem Prevention

I have often asked myself, after dealing with a difficult person, why I did not foresee the situation ahead of time. I have often felt that I could have prevented much of the abuse that I now had to take if I had "done my homework". Suzette Elgin's book, *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense*, and Muriel Solomon's *Working With Difficult People* are a treasure chest full of "tricks of the trade" in problem prevention.....or coping.

Know Your Environment and Know The Individual

Analyzing the environment, or better yet, the demands of your environment, might be a key issue when dealing with difficult people. Are there issues and special projects in the school that might be creating or setting up the "blowing off steam" of some people who might not usually be so difficult? Are we in the process of implementing some innovations and changes that are causing discomfort with some people? This is natural, but there are steps to lighten the frustration that goes with educational change. Are we in the process of some special reports; an accreditation self-study perhaps? Are there some especially troublesome parents (or teachers, or students.....or administrators) and the situation could use our intervention strategies? Are there some personal, family, or medical problems outside of the school that has some impact on increasing the agitation level of one or more people? How's the weather? Have we paid a compliment to a particular teacher, student or parent lately? Have we piled so much extra work on this person that he or she is drowning, but will not admit it? Is there an English (ESL) comprehension problem? The list is endless, but the fact of the matter is that we must take time to reflect on the environment and the individual prior to establishing potentially useful strategies.

Create a Buffer Zone

For a number of years, a very useful strategy that I used with middle and high school students (and sometimes with parents on the phone) was to create what I called a "buffer zone". When a student was sent to me or came in voluntarily, but angry about something, I insisted that he or she fill out a form that my secretary had. It had only a few questions on it, but the questions did two things: 1. They created a "cooling-off" period. 2. They made the student reflect (with written assistance) on the situation and usually established WHO was really at fault.

Creating a buffer zone though is important for both sides.

All of us have learned through experience that if we go into a communication situation angry, then the situation is just going to get worse.

When angry parents call and the secretary senses the anger, she purposely tells them I will call them back in just a few minutes and tries to question them about the problem so that her boss can have better information at his fingertips when he calls back. If an angry parent comes to my office when I am out in the building, I have standing instructions with the secretary to come to notify me immediately, then pull his/her child's file, talk to the counselor or ask the parent to provide some preliminary information. I will purposely give myself 5 minutes or so in order to prepare my own psyche and to collect information. I also tell secretaries to be as polite as possible and offer some refreshments or whatever to help set the stage for a more productive conference.

When an angry teacher comes in I often make excuses for him/her or me to take a little 3 or 4 minute break....a buffer zone, so that there can be a little "cooling off" if the discussion is going to be productive. I often advise parents to do the same when they are angry at their children....I am not sure that I always so easily follow the same advice with my own children. I advise students to do the same before "spouting off" at their parents over some issue. Time does not always heal, but it certainly does decrease the intensity of the anger. We have all heard the suggestion that a letter written in anger should be held at least until the next day. Good advice! The same is true in dealing with difficult people. Give yourself and them a chance for time to decrease the size of the problem and the amount of anger being experienced.

Establish Early Rapport

Sometimes, for various reasons, we tend to register in the back of our minds red flags on certain individuals who appear to be potentially difficult to deal with in the future. This is wise, but it is also a good idea to establish various degrees of

rapport with these people. A parent, board member, teacher, student or administrator.....we can usually tell ahead of time that they will be future headaches. My advice is NOT to patronize them....any intelligent person should be able to see right through this. No matter what the person is like, there are common-interest issues that can be brought up and a positive, or somewhat positive, rapport can be established. I have found that this is an especially effective way to deal with a vocal board member or parent. It is good advice for the teacher on the first or second day of school when he or she spots a potentially troublesome student. I call this "Preventive Maintenance". It could happen by supporting some issue or project that this person is involved in organizing. It might even be in verbal or non-verbal (body language) feedback by you at a meeting of some sort. It does not have to change your standards or your beliefs. It does not have to cost you a thing to establish some prevention techniques.

Styles of Listeners and Listening Techniques

We must also keep in mind that the first key to dealing with difficult people is to "listen, listen, listen!!" But, we must also be aware of HOW we listen and how the other person listens if we are to create a stepping stone to success. We must also be aware that some people have outwardly different listening techniques and we must avoid pushing them into a particular style that suits us. A parent, teacher or administrator who is talking to a student will often snap, "Look at me when I'm talking to you!" Hersey and Blanchard, in their well-known book **Management of Organizational Behavior**, give considerable discussion to this topic. They state, for example, that one classification of listeners, labeled 'auditories', "...don't always 'look people in the eye' because they're 'tuning an ear.' During a conversation or presentation, they may look elsewhere because they are listening and trying to take in data. Their intention is not to be rude or inattentive; they are trying to understand." (P. 313) So we must not jump the gun and I assume that the person is NOT

listening to us or not understanding us.

NASSP has published several articles and advice cards on practicing listening techniques. The latest, April, 1991, is a 2-page card called Tips for Principals - How to Use Listening Skills to be a More Effective Administrator. They re-state Nelson & Heeney's 1984 NASSP Bulletin on directed listening techniques. These 9 techniques are explained there in more detail, but to summarize: Listen (silently), clarify (rephrase), encourage, comment, focus (restate), negotiate (evaluate alternatives), demonstrate, direct (guide), reinforce.

Consequences - Verbal/Non-Verbal Messages

We discussed different listening techniques as a form of preventive maintenance in dealing with difficult people. There are other kinds of "messages" that give us clues as to how upset a person might be.....or how upset we are when dealing with another person. We have to watch these signs for ourselves, but we also can collect information on the other person. The rate of speech (speed), sentence structure & clarity, vocabulary, articulation, tone, rhythm and especially volume of ours or the other person's voice will reveal several indicators about how we feel. Non-verbal behavior is just as important. Body language such as eye contact, positioning, facial expressions, and gestures are all important indicators to consider.

The One-Minute Apology

Before moving on to specific situations, I should add one more general notion, that of the "One-Minute Apology". Everyone makes mistakes but few admit it. The suggestion is to do it as soon as possible because, as we all know, the longer we wait, the more difficult it is to accomplish. What it does in dealing with difficult people is to release any guilt that you may have for the inappropriate behavior and it clears the air for more productive communication with the difficult person. Tell the person though that what you are apologizing for is behavior that is unlike what you would have done if you had given it clearer

12

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thought. (H&B, P. 389)

Administrators Dealing With Difficult People

Best Traits of Leaders and "Fatal Flaws"

One of the most quoted books in Education, Business and Sociology is Hersey and Blanchard's **Management of Organizational Behavior** because it clearly indicates the importance of "Situational Leadership" and the necessity to deal with people according to their maturity or "readiness" level. They have two lists in their 5th edition indicating the traits and skills found most frequently to be characteristic of successful leaders and another list of those which can be considered as "fatal flaws". Some of the positive traits include:

- Traits:** Adaptable to situations
Assertive
Cooperative
Decisive, Dependable
Energetic
Willing to assume responsibility
Persistent
- Skills:** Clever (intelligent)
Creative
Diplomatic and tactful
Fluent in speaking
Knowledgeable about group task
Organized (administrative ability)
Persuasive
Socially skilled

Some of the "Fatal Flaws" attributed to McCall and Lombardo are:

- style Insensitive to others: abrasive, intimidating, bullying
- Cold, aloof, arrogant
 Betrayal of trust
 Overly ambitious, playing politics
 Overmanaging - unable to delegate or build a team
 Unable to adapt to boss with different style
 Unable to think strategically (H&B, Pp. 89,90)

Whenever I consider how I am going to deal with a difficult person, I always run those lists through my mind. What traits will help me lose this situation no matter how "right" I might be? What traits will add to my chances of success? I would memorize these lists because they most certainly do add to the

degree of potential success or failure in dealing with difficult people. They are referred to in several books as "Attitudinal Approaches".

It should be obvious that effective leaders and managers, first and foremost, must have strong abilities in oral and written communication skills. Almost all other considerations seem to fall within these categories.

Administrators Dealing With Teachers

Of all the different people that school administrators must deal with on a daily basis, teachers fall into the largest category. As stated previously, though, a lot can be done in "preventive maintenance" in dealing with teachers. The administrator who really knows, personally and professionally, all of his or her teachers, will find it somewhat easier to formulate a better method of reacting to them when difficult times arise.

In general those principals and administrators who have high exposure in the hallways, the cafeteria and the classrooms will find that they can better deal with difficult teachers because they will have more background information stored in their brains.

Catch them doing something right: I have found that in trying to establish some kind of rapport or working relationships with especially difficult to handle teachers, I can pry the door open by searching for something right or especially noteworthy that they have done and privately or publically expressing my pleasure in observing this. This tact may also begin an attitudinal change.....as slow as that process might be. BUT, be careful, as with students, we can not patronize them or give them credit for false achievements. They will see right through that tactic and it could backfire on the administrator. We tell teachers all of the time, "Search for some positive aspect of every student's work or activity." Just paying a little more attention to the particular teacher may begin the attitude

change. It may also cause "paranoia", but a little of that may also be alright for a difficult-to-handle-teacher. We also don't have to wait for exactly the right behavior before praising teachers. We can "catch" them doing things approximately right or well. Blanchard and Johnson in their *One Minute Manager*, Hersey and Blanchard in their *Management of Organizational Behavior*, Peters and Waterman in *In Search of Excellence* and Waterman in his *Renewal Factor* all discuss the important aspect of "MBWA" or "Management by Walking Around" in order to catch people doing things right. Don't store up the list of good things people are doing, let them know on the spot.

Treat with Respect: I don't know many principals or managers who will admit that they don't treat their teachers and staff members with respect, yet the teachers and staff members have listed this as one of their chief complaints when I interview them about why they want to move to another organization or during my membership on accreditation teams. Genuinely treating them with respect (and not just publically, but privately as well,) can lead to relationships that are more open and in which teachers will feel free to share their feelings honestly. If "feedback is the bread and butter" of an effective school, then it is important that administrators try to establish a relationship where there is mutual respect and feedback is free flowing. This will tend to promote "getting things off their chests" so that there are less chances of "blow ups" and difficult to handle confrontations. Again, "preventive maintenance"!

You Don't Have to Accept the "Monkey" to Help Find a Solution: The old addage about taking on someone else's monkey (or problem) can cause your own difficult situation or make the difficult person even more intolerable. If you let someone else's monkey jump from their back to yours, then trust will be lost if YOU do not solve the problem directly yourself. Your job is to help people work out a list of possible solutions to their

problems. Don't be too quick to say, "I'll do that for you, Sue....as soon as I can scrape up a little time." There will probably never be enough time. Tell Sue where to look or what opportunities she has for solving her own problem. You will build more trust with employees by this method than by attempting to take over their problem with some kind words. Hersey and Blanchard say to, "Keep the monkey where it belongs!....Managers are exhausted from trying to solve all their subordinates' problems." (H&B, P. 268)

The One Minute Reprimand: This section is followed with dealing with incompetent or marginal teachers, but, to precede it, I would like to make some suggestions concerning dealing with difficult teachers on a one-time basis. Blanchard was also one of the authors of The One Minute Manager. One of the chief concepts of that well-known best seller is "The One Minute Reprimand". I have really taken hold of this concept. As with the technique for praising, an administrator should not "store up his list of gripes" then let them all come pouring out at a time when emotions are running high. They may be considerably out of proportion to the incident that actually initiated the confrontation.

If a reprimand is necessary, then do it....be quick, be specific, share your feelings and then say something positive about the person. Good teacher evaluation and observation techniques indicate that it is best to not bring up other weak points at a specific, follow-up conference. Discuss only related incidents or behaviors. So too, in a reprimand, do it and stick to the facts. Many specialists in this area also suggest dealing with the "behavior" involved, not the person. This will result in the person reflecting on the incident that he/she did not handle well rather than the way the meeting between you two went.

Protect the Teachers

Another preventive strategy in dealing with potentially difficult teachers is for principals to protect the school day for teaching and learning. "They do this by keeping teachers' administrative chores and classroom interruptions to a minimum." (What Works, P. 64) When teachers see this effort by principals and other administrators, a sense of trust builds and when you are in a situation that is difficult to deal with with a particular teacher, you can cite these efforts to protect their day so that they can be the best possible teachers.

Managing the Incompetent/Marginal Teacher

We have covered some of the aspects of preventive measures for administrators in dealing with difficult teachers and we talked a little about those one-time shots, but one of the most ulcer-bearing and time-consuming situations for an administrator is dealing on a consistent basis with a generally incompetent or marginal teacher and this teacher is very often difficult to deal with. Edwin M. Bridges has written a number of books and monographs on the subject, but especially as it applies to "tenured teachers" because they seem to be more difficult to deal with due to their status.

Bridges discusses the preventive or preliminary steps to dealing with teachers in this category in the form of improved evaluation and supervision systems and better collection of information. This and the imparting of your (or the district's) expectations is crucial to determining if you really do, in fact, have a marginal, incompetent or, hopefully, a correctable teacher.

This monograph is not about improving evaluation processes, but I would suggest that these processes be looked at in preventing difficult teacher situations. This section is about dealing with the consistently difficult teacher who may be

marginal or incompetent.

Bridges stresses the collection of varied kinds of information as a starting point. He also cautions utilizing only parent complaints about a particular teacher because in the absence of other organizational evaluation procedures could be viewed as ill-founded. A system for voicing complaints by parents and students should be encouraged though.

If various types of remediation have failed (goal setting, instructional input, modeling, coaching, counseling, etc.) an environmental change may be in order. This may be done by reassigning the teacher to another room, grade or subject. Then remediation may be possible. The supervisors too, must have the tools to diagnose the reasons for the substandard performance. Too often, the supervisors have internalized the situation due to the hard time that they have had in dealing with this teacher. The supervisors then must be able to impart remediation techniques and to conduct conferences that include many of the techniques indicated on these pages. They must also document the situation over a period of time for both legal and for supervisory reasons.

In dealing with consistently difficult teachers a supervisor or administrator must always consider the legal aspects of "due process" and if it appears that the relationship with the teacher is going to eventually lead to dismissal, then all the more reason why the course must be careful and complete. Timely, written notices, attempts at remediation, continuous conferences are all important to the process.

Daily Contact with the Marginal/Incompetent Teacher

If you have diagnosed the situation as correctable then frequent conferences with the teacher, giving support and reaffirmation are in order. Don't give false praise and don't overpraise. Pick out a particular area of weakness that the teacher has obviously been attempting to improve. Be visible in that teacher's classroom and give feedback continuously. Let them know when they are no longer on a type of probationary

status when appropriate.

If the teacher is adamant in blaming other people or situations for all of his/her shortcomings, keep coming back to, "That may be so, but what are you going to do to improve this situation?"

If the diagnosis is that the teacher needs to look for another occupation, then there are several tactics that Bridges discusses in several of his publications. These are in addition to the district's procedures for "dismissal". Counseling them out has worked for many. Drop hints every so often that possibly another line of related work might be better for their unique personality. Provide information of job opportunities that might interest them. If your daily contact with them becomes so de-energizing and time-consuming, then you need to directly state that you would like to meet this person at specific times (or time) during the next two weeks. Keep the appointments short but productive. Listen and keep calm. They, like the difficult parent, may run out of steam. Question them about the remediation attempts that you have tried to construct. "How have your sessions been going with your peer coach?" You can also be so daring as to suggest that at the next scheduled meeting, you would like him/her to center in on some constructive efforts or improved facets of their school life....no complaints, no pointing of fingers. Whatever you do, do NOT take on that person's monkey (or problem). Practice different leadership styles with different teachers. Hersey and Blanchard ask, "Why is it that a leadership style that may not be our 'natural' style is frequently our most effective style.?" (P. 180) The answer, of course, is that we have practiced it.

Teachers in Groups

Probably most principals have their most frequent dealings with difficult teachers during group meetings: Teachers' Meetings, Department Meetings and Special Interest Meetings. The principals must necessarily watch very closely how they react or act at these meetings. Don't over-react and snap back at

something said at these meetings. Treating staff members (even those who may not seem to deserve it) with respect should lead to a relationship in which they and the other teachers at the meeting feel free to share and talk and provide feedback that is so necessary for a productive meeting. (Hersey & Blanchard, P. 279) These authors deal with this topic in a most diagnostic and constructive way. They discuss "Helping and Hindering Roles" of individuals within groups. (P. 323) In the "Helping" category, we would see actions that would hopefully act as preventors of opportunities for difficult people to come to the surface. These are applied to the different situational leadership categories of Telling, Selling, Participating, Delegating. Some of the "Helping" roles could be Clarifying purpose, maintaining direction, persuading, committing and "attending" (communication) techniques. The "Hindering" roles by teachers or supervisors can be aggressive, manipulative, selective interpretation, topic jumping and masking statements as questions. Sometimes the "Passive-aggressive" teacher may hinder by agreeing with everything, avoiding decisions, and expressing futility or helplessness. The meeting chairperson needs to recognize these "helping and hindering techniques" in order to deal effectively with difficult group members. Start meetings on time, move them along, don't be the sole speaker and intervene when necessary! Set, and ~~en~~ enforce meeting time limits for most effective results.

The principal can choose to ignore the unwanted comment or "dig", thank the person for his/her comment and move on. He may also ask one of the other members of the group if they would like to comment on the statement by the "difficult person". If no comments are forthcoming, this should be a sign to the "difficult person" that the comment was inappropriate. Even when a reply is warranted, the principal or supervisor need not ever feel that he or she is backed into a corner. We can always say, "Thank you for your concern. I'll look into it and get back with you."

The principal or group supervisor must also reflect every so often on his or her own emotional well-being. I have often asked a fellow administrator or teacher to give me signals if my voice

begins to raise in volume too much or if I start speaking too fast or if I portray other negative body language, so that I can still catch and correct myself. The "boss" needs to analyze those same characteristics with those members of the meeting who are speaking. Those aspects of speech and body language already discussed would be indicators of how the boss should or should not respond or react to the teacher. Preventing "contamination" by one member of the group to other members may necessitate closing the meeting earlier than originally planned and setting a new date. This is one tactic used with parents who will not restrain themselves after the principal has utilized his whole "bag of tricks". This is also utilized in student groups.

Be an active listener! Don't always be planning what your next statement (or interruption) will be. Really listen to what the group members are saying. Reflect and repeat back sometimes so that they know you are really listening to them. You don't have to agree or give answers right then and there....just let them know that you heard them.

When a member of a group becomes abrasive or emotionally distraught, it might be necessary for you to somehow communicate to that person that he or she might like to take a break for a few minutes. If the meeting has gone on for quite a while, it might even be appropriate to suddenly give a break for everyone and corner that person during that time. Do it in a non-accusatory, calm and quiet manner though. "Tom, why don't you stop in tomorrow to discuss that issue. It's obviously a very emotional one for you and I'd like to hear more of your thoughts on the subject. Let's try to move on to the other issues in this meeting though, O.K.?"

There are times though when it is best to just let people shoot off their mouths. They will often take care of their own reputations themselves (the old 'cut-their-own-throat-technique'). Quietly acknowledge their statement and move on.

Group - Teacher/Teacher Squabbles

If two teachers begin squabbling with each other at a

meeting, it is the duty of the supervisor to interrupt immediately. Humor or assertive voice, depending on the situation, may be appropriate in order to set things moving on a productive track again. "It's nice that people are taking this matter to heart, but we need to move on now....." or, "Thank you both for your intense involvement, but we really need to deal with this matter in a less emotional (or personal) manner."

Administrators Dealing With Parents

Remember the statement at the end of the introduction to this monograph attributed to Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin? "Remember that nobody can fight alone. If you refuse to fight, even the most hostile verbal attacker will give up." It applies to so many situations in dealing with difficult people. Parents tend to be one of the most difficult to deal with for superintendents and principals, but let's put ourselves in their place for just a moment.

Michael Fullan, in his well-known book *The Meaning of Educational Change* devotes an entire chapter to dealings by administrators and teachers with parents. He says, "Parents should be forgiven if they wonder what is going on in schools." (P. 203) Most of Fullan's comments on the role of parents in the school are related to parent-teacher relationships and I will refer more to him in that section. Most of what he relates has to do with the misperceptions that parents and administrators (or teachers) have of each other.

How often do we have an angry parent at our doorstep because of something that his or her child has related concerning the school. Roderick Marcotte, a principal for a number of years in the South Burlington, Vermont school district told me one day that in dealing with parents, the first week of school, he sends a letter to them stating that, "If you will not believe everything that your child tells you about what is going on at school, then we promise that we will not believe everything that your child tells us about what is going on at home." A humorous, but excellent strategy!

Before tackling specific situations involving administrators and parents, remember that it DOES take two to "tangle". The

best strategy may be the easiest.....just listen.....and let them get "it" off their chests. Then remind them that while you are not calling their child a liar, kids in general tell only 50% (if that much) of a story....the part that makes them seem the most faultless. There is ALWAYS another side to a story, so lets check on that before we do anything else. I refer to this as "Selective Omission", not lying!

Parents and the Telephone

Both during my six years with the military and during my number of years as an educator, I remember hearing the same thing over and over again from my bosses: "People are braver on the telephone." They can spout off and get away with it....there is no eye contact.

In dealing with angry or just difficult parents over the telephone, the use of several cautious procedures might be especially helpful, because, let's face it, most principals spend considerable time on the telephone.

NAESP and NASSP have printed several kinds of advice for administrators utilizing the telephone. One excellent, concise, yet pertinent information sheet was published in October 1985 by NAESP (Vol. 4, No. 2). It was in their Here's How series and this particular one is entitled "the Principal and the Telephone". This two page cardboard sheet has a wealth of information for all situations for the principal and the telephone.

In dealing with the frequent or chronic complainer, they suggest that at the outset of the conversation you explain that you can speak only for a few minutes because of your other responsibilities. You can also have it set up with the secretary so that she will loudly interrupt you to remind you of another appointment or another call. You can also arrange to talk "in more detail" at another time, but set the other time so that there will be limitations. Before⁴ school or just after school finishes might be appropriate."

In dealing with what this information sheet refers to as a

"recognized pest", the secretary needs to diplomatically state that you are not available but perhaps the caller would like to leave a message. Most often these types of people will not leave a message and sometimes will not even leave their names but will call (or have their secretary call) again until they make contact.

Your secretary can certainly be the key to dealing with many of the problem phone calls from parents. This is especially true with the angry or hostile parent. The secretary and the boss must always keep in mind that the anger, whether justified or not, is probably not directed personally at either of them. As in dealing with difficult teachers, administrators must learn to NOT internalize the anger for which they have become the receptors in any given situation. As with angry students, I try to create a buffer zone before tackling a call from an angry parent. I ask the secretary to tell them that I will call them back at a specific time (or the anger increases with the unknown waiting time)....say in 30 minutes or one hour. Then I (and the secretary) utilize that time for research. Most angry parents will not tell the secretary the exact nature of their concern so we 'hit' the main people: the counselor, nurse and after scrutinizing the latest report card, possibly the teacher of the lowest performance classes to see if there have been any recent incidents that could be pertinent. I also always have the record of the student in question on my desk when I return the call. If I get a call directly, no matter what it is about, my secretary is trained to get the records immediately of the children of the caller. More often than not, this quick collection of information pays off. In fact, quite often I can have the counselor or the teacher concerned sitting right next to me for the return call and very often, turn it over to them if applicable.

No matter what is said or what accusations come flying across the telephone lines the three best approaches are:

1. Remain very calm and concentrate on the message the hostile person is trying to relate.

2. Listen, listen, listen. The NAESP sheet suggests that you allow the angry person to completely vent his or her emotions so as to help clear the air.

3. "Do not accept responsibility for the caller's anger, and do not apologize for producing it. Such an admission would undercut your role as objective arbiter." This is the advice given in the NAESP sheet and good advice it is. This goes along with not letting the proverbial "monkey" (or problem) to jump on to your back.

A fourth one might be to insist that the parent come in to the school to meet with you directly, especially if the person becomes emotionally charged or accusatory and won't let up. I have only had one case in the past fifteen years whereby this insistence didn't produce a more productive conference. There is a reason for this. As Hersey and Blanchard state, you can then be in a position to "lead" certain aspects of the emotionally charged situation. By your body language or words, you can create a calming effect and produce more options for progress.

The last thought on dealing with difficult people on the telephone is that once you are able to create some calm or some break from the hostility, then it is time to try to target the source of the anger. NAESP says very properly, "Do not leave the situation unresolved." Refer them to someone else if necessary, but there may be dividends in YOU setting up the appointment. "Let me have Mr. Barton, the counselor telephone you. I believe that he may have some insights on that problem." If you promise to do something for them, then, by all means DO IT! Dropping the issue will only incinerate it. If you refer the parent to an agency or person outside the school and they must make their own appointment, as often happens, tell them that you ^{or counselor} will call first to let that agency know that they, the parent, is going to contact them and you hope for some special or kind assistance.....then do it.

As with all interpersonal⁴ relations, whether on the phone or sitting across from you, you can tell a lot by various aspects of articulation. The speed of the words, the enunciation and the

volume should all be indicators of caution to the administrator.

The important thing for school administrators and teachers in dealing with parents, especially on the telephone, is to not use educational and pedantic jargon. This may only further confuse the issue.

The Unexpected "Hostile" Parent

Anyone who has been a school administrator for at least one year knows the feeling of suddenly having an angry or hostile parent show up at their doorstep. It's a feeling of helplessness. At least with the telephone, you can build a little "buffer zone" into the situation with a little practice and expertise. You usually have no idea what the problem is and therefore have little or no time to "research" it so that you can, at least, go into the meeting with some knowledge and tools at your disposal.

Some of the possibilities depend on the set-up of the school office area and where you are at the time of the angry parent's arrival.

If there is an empty office or room nearby, it would be best to have a secretary or you guide this parent or parents there. If a secretary does this, she should ask if there is any information about the problem that she can relate to the principal so that he/she could better prepare for the meeting (which should be as soon as the principal can get free....and that is how it should be stated). The chances are probably 50-50 that you may get SOME indication from the parents about the problem.

If the principal is out in the building, the secretary should be prepared to deal with the situation in much the same way as previously suggested. She guides the parent to an empty office, asks if there is some information about the nature of the problem she can pass on to the principal and state that the principal will be with them as soon as he can break away from his present appointment. Then she should find the principal and the "5-Minute" Research should begin: the counselor, the records, the report card and a teacher or two. Take the records with you when you arrive to meet the parents. Very often they won't be needed, but it is better to be prepared.

Disarming the Angry or Hostile Parent: It does not always

work, but I have found many more successes than failures in a cautious smile, a firm handshake and a statement such as, "Hello Mr. and Mrs. Greene. I know that you must have a serious concern to come in together without an appointment like this. I'd like to give you my undivided attention." If the parents are "chronic complainers" then you can add a statement about having to be in another place in 10 or 15 minutes and have it set up so that the secretary insists that you get ready to close the meeting just before that time. This kind of statement says several things:

1. You want to treat the matter seriously.
2. You are graciously reminding them that they DID come in without an appointment, so you expect that it is a serious matter.
3. You have hopefully disarmed them to a degree, so that the meeting can be productive. You want to be friendly, yet, you want to show them that you want to treat their concern with seriousness. While humor is a great disarming tactic, it is usually inappropriate in these situations.

The next tactics are similar to the telephone procedures. Listen, listen, listen., You have the capability of "leading" them somewhat by your own verbal and non-verbal activities. Leaning forward, keeping your eyes on them (not on something else on your desk for example) and giving them a nod or "Yes, I see," occasionally will show them you are interested.

If their voices start showing some of the signs of emotion, i.e. rapid talking, increased volume, choppy sentences and unclear pronunciation, try to gently interrupt and repeat back some of their statements in a soft, slow and articulate voice. You need not agree or disagree....just repeat: "So, if I'm hearing you correctly, Mr. and Mrs. Greene, you are saying that Mrs. Thomas, the math teacher stated that she was going to flunk your daughter just because she was tardy three times?"

At this point, it is very important that you keep brief notes on any promises made to them. You should never call in the teacher, on the spot, with no forewarning and ask her/him in front of the parents if this accusation is true....no matter how outrageous it might be. You will lose the trust of the teachers.

Remember, there is ALWAYS another side to every story. If it is something that you believe can be cleared up on the spot, have the parents sit tight and say that you want to check on something. If the teacher is free (or the situation is "checkable") ask him or her in private about the accusation. If it is a simple explanation, as it often is, ask the teacher if she/he would feel comfortable to come to your office to relate the information to the parents. In the Minorities & Asian Parents section, I have dealt with this procedure with some additional suggestions concerning the importance of not having the parents or the student lose face in solving the problem.

If the explanation is confusing, or it appears that, in a fit of anger, the teacher did precisely what the parents accusation said, then you may want to go back to the parents and tell them that within 24 hours you will try to get the facts on the matter and either you or the teacher will directly get back with them.

When guiding parents out, with the problem solved or not solved, it is most important to profusely thank them for taking time from their busy schedules to come in to relate their concern. I will often (depending on the parent's history and relation with the school) add something like, "I wish that more parents took such a genuine interest in their child's education. I hope the outcome will not be as serious as it first appeared."

If the situation has nothing to do with an incident with a teacher but rather something that you feel that you can not budge on: i.e. a white parent wants her child moved from a black teacher's room and the reason is outrageously evident, you need to do pretty much the same procedure in listening, listening, listening. Let them get it off their chest. If you feel that an unwarranted bias is at the heart of the problem, try to guide the discussion in that direction so that they will finally admit it. Rather than to show outrage or disgust, you may have to pleasantly smile and "bite the bullet", "You know Mrs. Muffin, we have been so fortunate to have Mr. Williams as a 5th Grade Teacher. He provides such a good role model and I have to tie

him down sometimes because he wants to volunteer for everything. His students won the recent inter-school spelling bee, etc. etc. etc." If there is nothing good and outstanding about each and every one of your teachers that you can not pull out immediately (and it should be true by the way,) then maybe that teacher (or you) shouldn't be there. This is where MBWA (Management By Walking Around) or constant exposure will pay off. Even with 85 teachers, I feel that I could confidently come up with a short list of special outstanding things that I could relate with no preparation. If your staff is too large or you have several new teachers, keep a special file so that secretaries and you can put notes next to each name as something notable happens. Again, you do not have to give a final answer right there...and you need to insure that parents don't back you into a corner in trying to get one. If you suspect that your final answer is going to be against their desires, you can give a "preview" by saying something like,

"We have had a rather strict policy concerning the movement of children from one room to another for those reasons, but since you felt it was so important an issue to come into

school unexpectedly like this, I would like to look into the situation before making a final decision. I'll let you know by phone or letter by tomorrow afternoon. Thank you so much for taking the time to come in to discuss this with me. I know how busy you usually are so it must be important to you."

While a direct phone call is best, sometimes a proper explanation needs some back-up information that can be better put into a letter or attached to an official letter. A letter also makes it official and leaves no room for misinterpretation. How many times have you had a parent come back to you to say, But, you said that it was O.K.!" when it was not. Parents (and teachers and students) in distress will often hear just what they want to hear. When making a controversial decision, make absolutely sure that it is clear and understood. In cases which could backfire or cause future problems, I will often follow up a phone call with a letter. Even if the letter is more

appropriate, I would have a secretary (or do it directly yourself, if it is very important) call the home or office to let the concerned parents know that a letter with the explanation is going home with the child today.

These diplomatic, information-gathering, and communication skills with angry or hostile parents will often have an additional benefit. I have often found a frequently problematic parent taking a new approach to the school, the administrators and the faculty and staff because we did not put them off and treated them with respect. I look at these opportunities as a chance to "bring them over to our side!" This is one of the tactics utilized with boards and parent advisory council troublesome members. Yes, this can also cause an increase in the number of meetings that they want or show up unexpectedly for.....but, it's worth the chance. You can use a different strategy for too frequent, follow-up meetings.

The Planned Parent Meeting

Pretty much the same strategies are used with the planned meeting with a troublesome parent as with the unexpected meeting, but now you have more time for research and information gathering. Again, I check with the counselor, the records, the report card and a few teachers to see if there is some issue that has come up.....if the parents have refused to let me know what the concern is. Usually, with a little prying by the secretary or the principal, at least a hint of the problem area can be revealed.

Depending on the family and the student, I have sometimes met the student accidentally (on purpose) in the halls between classes and asked if he/she knew what it was that the parents wanted to see me about. Be cautious on this one though. Sometimes I've asked the parents if the daughter or son was aware of the planned meeting. Sometimes, with something such as a pregnancy, drugs or emotional problems, the parents have not let the child know about the meeting and find it very difficult to

even give a hint over the phone....so don't press too hard.

The same types of strategies should be utilized in making a very friendly greeting and a statement that it must be an important concern they have for them to come in like this. Listen, observe body language and voice control and re-state their words every so often so that they will know you are listening "actively". As with the unexpected, angry parent, you need not give an answer or a decision right then and there. DO give them an exact time that they can expect one though so that the storm clouds don't get stirred up again.

One other note: There are cases sometimes, especially with elementary and middle school students whereby more than 50% of the real story was not told to the parents or, an outrageous lie was told. When it is obvious, I have asked the parents if they minded if we brought in their child to see if there wasn't some chance of a misinterpretation. No one (at least not at first) calls anyone a liar. I often provide a set-up so that the student has an easy way out. "Jennifer, I wonder if it is possible that you misunderstood Mrs. Sanders when she said....." With middle school and elementary students, this serious situation of being in the principal's office with the principal and the parents is usually enough for the clearing up of the "misinterpretation". With high school students, it requires a little more skill to pull out the truth. Maybe the truth will never come out, but you can at least set the stage to clarify the intentions of a teacher, or whatever, and set the ground rules for the future.

In cases where a student often goes home and tells partial truths or outright lies, I set it up with the teacher (or teachers) to have frequent communication with the home. If they send special papers or notes home, then they should call the parent to "warn" them that something is coming home. If the parents are not home, then, a request on the "note" should ask the parent to acknowledge by a telephone call at _____o'clock. The student soon learns that the school and the home are a working team and the unacceptable behavior will hopefully cease.

The main point in a planned meeting is to let the parents have their say and for you to do some active listening. Be gracious and polite no matter how outrageous the complaint might be. A principal who DOES NOT do his homework for a planned meeting probably deserves what he will get.....the unexpected!

Dealing with Board Members or Parent Advisory Council Members

Next to unexpected visits by angry parents, one of the most unpleasant tasks of principals or school administrators is the unexpected lashing out by a member of a board or parent advisory council. Of course, the temptation is there to "strike back" but don't do it!

The first suggestion is to let this person run out of steam. Let them get their case off their chest if it is appropriate to the subject matter and agenda of that particular meeting. Remember, many board members and advisory council members use their "position" to air their own neatly disguised grievances. Sometimes there are justified concerns, but the place and time is not appropriate. If this is the case, politely state that it appears that the parent has a genuine concern that certainly needs looking into, however, "We were hoping that this meeting now could be concerned with _____. Maybe we could get on with this meeting and Mr. Stacy could meet with me (or whomever) immediately following this session so that we could get more specifics on the problem." This will usually do it for the time being. In fact, that kind of polite face-saving tactic will usually bring the particular parent over to the administration's "side" (how I hate that word) for the rest of the meeting.

These official members will often disguise their child's problem with statements like, "Several parents have called me about....." or they will exaggerate the number of complaints they have had from other parents or students. This should be inconsequential in dealing with the problem. You will usually know right off if there is really a wide-spread problem or not, but you can usually deal with it as such without any real damage to anyone.

There is an occasional member who just seems to not ever have anything good to say about the school or its administrators. If you are chairing the meeting, you might try to act nonplussed or, at least without any emotion, and just say, "Thank you Mrs. Rosenberg for your comments. We'll certainly look into the situation. Now, moving right along....." Sometimes, it is necessary to gently interrupt and say basically the same thing with the addition of....."We really need to move on to another topic or we will not get through the rest of our important agenda items for the day."

Listening, with supportive body language, need be the only tactic in many cases. If you know that a particularly difficult-to-handle member is going to accuse you or the school of something....you've been pre-warned, you can always collect information on the subject...but be careful of how you present it or if you should present it publically at all. Remain calm, use voice control (speed, diction and volume), and do active listening. Restate the problem if you want to insure that it goes on the record correctly. To meet anger with anger will just defeat any atmosphere of progress that the meeting could produce.

I have often had another administrator or friendly member "pace" me so as to give me some kind of sign that my voice speed, or volume, or diction, or body language, or whatever needs to be cautioned. This helps very much.

If you are not running the meeting, sometimes just silence is the best tactic. Don't let them goad you! That's what they wanted. If it is common knowledge that there will be a troublesome board or advisory council member present, it is sometimes advisable to set up a process with the person chairing the meeting. He can just acknowledge the comments and state that he is sure that the administration will want to look into it....maybe he should stop in and talk directly to an administrator about it, thank him for it and move on to the next item. It may or MAY NOT be appropriate to respond at all publically to the remarks made by a chronic complainer.

Know your Environment

As with teachers and administrators, when dealing with difficult parents, know your environment! If you know something about the family, it may help to deal with the problem. Are there some personal problems at home? Are there work problems? Are there financial problems? Are some of the problems just naturally associated with the usual changes experienced with children growing up? Check out all the possibilities. Remember, if you let yourself become the brunt of the anger, you will internalize the attack and be emotionally distraught because it appeared that the parents were attacking you. You must avoid this internalization at all costs.

Puberty-related Problems for Parents of Middle Schoolers

During my thirteen-year period of being a middle (or secondary 6-12) principal, the greatest number of distressed communications that I received from parents had to do with the natural processes (sometimes biological and sometimes emotional) associated with puberty. "What the heck is going on at that school nowadays? My son used to be very respectful, he shared things with us, came home on time each day, did his chores and homework and never talked back to us. Nowadays he talks back all the time, is very secretive, never tells us anything about what is going on at school and seems to be embarrassed when we're around him in public! Who is responsible for this? Is he hanging around with some 'bad' kids nowadays?!" My first comment is to say, "Congratulations, Mrs. Jackson, your son is in the throes of puberty! Nearly everything you've just related to me is quite typical for a 6th or 7th grade boy just beginning puberty. We need to work on how "we're" going to react (or not react) to this new obstacle to your relationship." Then you can refer the parent to the counselor, nurse, or discuss some of the potentially successful approaches that they can try. I always keep some booklets in my office that I will send them relating some of these things. Effective and successful middle schools will have open seminars on the changes that "are no one's fault"

before they become issues for difficult parents.

Follow up Meetings With Parents over Student Problems

When you have been working with parents on any particular problem associated with a student, be sure to follow up on it. Try to find a genuine reason to compliment them on their efforts. Even in the worst cases, if there is just some small aspect of the coordination that seems to be working, try to give the parents a pat on the back so as to insure that they will continue to work with you. Remember that parents of the "hard-to-handle" student have probably heard nothing but negative information from many, many sources. "It's obvious that you are having a positive impact on Bart. He seems to be getting to bed a lot earlier nowadays....at least he doesn't fall asleep in class any more." If you are meeting a difficult parent as a follow-up to a problem area, you should be able to do the research easily. Talk to teachers, counselor, even the student himself. It shouldn't be difficult to find one aspect that you can attribute to the parents....even if it is doubtful that they did it intentionally. Maybe the student was "grounded" and went to sleep early out of boredom.....so what?

Working Effectively With Asian and Minority Parents

As teachers and administrators we must be constantly aware of cultural diversity that will result in different approaches to dealing with difficult parents. We must be sensitive to cultural idiosyncrasies and suggestions that could make the situation worse. The use of certain words or terms, the sitting arrangements, the loss of face could all be unintentional, yet disastrous.

Suzette Elgin in her book on *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* talks about the importance of being sensitive to distance----- the size of the personal space that other people want to have around them. It varies from group to group. She says, "Much research shows that Latinos need a smaller personal space than do Anglos, which leads to many incidents in which the

Latino keeps trying to move closer as the Anglo keeps trying to move away...." (P. 204) Since we can not always know the "personal space" requirement of various kinds of people and nationalities, we need to be on the alert for signs. If the person keeps moving closer to us, then we need to hold still until they stop moving in. This may require controlling our own urges to deal with our own "personal space".

The November 1988 issue of the Phi Delta KAPPAN had an article by Dr. Esther Lee Yao called "Working Effectively with Asian Immigrant Parents". The article is appropriate to most minorities in its approach to sensitivity with different minority parents. Having worked in Asian international schools and having written chapters in books and in the newspapers on this subject, I consider myself a "semi-expert" on this issue....at least concerning association with Asian parents and students.

Again, we must do our homework if the number of a particular minority is on the increase in ~~four~~ schools. Dr. Yao says that administrators and teachers must ask some important questions and we need effective communication skills and an understanding of various aspects of how these parents are involved in their children's education. Most Asians have an enormous respect for education as the key to future success. Don't lump all Asians together though. Koreans, Japanese, Taiwanese, some Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian countries DO still have this great respect for education and for educators. A new influx of Chinese from mainland China, where Confucianism and education were not in recent times, central to the goals of families during the past 40 years might find the importance of education lacking somewhat.

The new immigrant Asian parent may still be a "passive-aggressor". They may appear somewhat quiet and submissive at first, but after they have been there a while and have learned the system by which their children can get ahead and gain entrance to college, they will become more assertive and aggressive.

One of the greatest problems in dealing with Asian parents is when a professional counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist is

needed. The mere mention of this can bring anger and distress unknown with all other parents. They may actively refuse to consult outside help and often will go home and tell the student that they have embarrassed the entire, extended family for putting them into this position....."Now shape up!" The child may, in fact, have a real need for the professional counselor so where do we go from here? In private schools we have had to sometimes just state that for the child to remain at the school, the child will have to see a professional counselor. The parent will usually call after the first meeting and say, "O.K., she's all 'fixed'. She doesn't need a counselor anymore." I have had to state emphatically that the professional counselor will decide when and if the sessions will cease. Many schools also learned to offer their list of acceptable counselors because the parents will often find a relative or friend who is really not a counselor, per se, and try to maintain total secrecy of the situation...but, of course there is no confidentiality for the student, nor any real help. Dr. Yao suggests that, "Some parents hold such high ideals for their children that they overlook or deny physical, mental, or social limitations."

Getting the parents of a large minority involved in school activities, PTO's or advisory councils can aid in the better understanding by both sides of cultural idiosyncrasies. Many international schools and schools where growing numbers of Asians, Hispanics, etc. are evident, the school often translates newsletters into the language of that growing minority. There are often sessions and seminars for them to attend in their native language.

Dr. Yao reflects on an issue that I have discussed with teachers in their dealings with various Asian and minority groups of parents - that of communication style. "The choice of words is crucial, especially for Asian immigrant parents who take teachers' remarks about their children very seriously. Even a casual adjective or a sentence tossed off lightly could create a problem for the child. So substitute unfamiliar with American customs for rude, reserved for passive, disinterested for lazy."

Try to learn things about body language that portray various feelings to some nationalities....even after more than one generation of Americanization. Crossing legs, crossing arms, gestures, posture and facial expressions can all convey non-caring attitudes or anger on your part.

In some countries "cheating", while not considered proper, is often overlooked as a means to an end. Few things are more important than getting into that top college, so be aware. These are not "bad" parents....quite the opposite, they are loving and caring and involved parents. Their own enthusiasm often takes them beyond the bounds of acceptability by our usual standards. Covering for students when they are skipping, helping them with a very time-consuming A.P. (Advanced Placement) project and even lying for them is considered reasonable in order to keep them out of public trouble. The student may pay a very high price at home though.

Because of these differences, the one special tactic that can and should be utilized with some Asians and with several other minorities is the ability to provide a "face-saving" device when dealing with difficult minority parents. We often say, "Oh, it might have been a language misunderstanding...", (even when we're quite sure it wasn't). "Saving Face" is extremely important for Asian parents (and some students). You could do more harm to the student if you cause the parents to lose face. And it should be their definition of what loses face, not yours. Work with them on acceptable solutions. Ask them. Be aware that language and culture CAN play an important role in causing misunderstandings and loss of face. Be careful and be sensitive.

When I was asked by the American Chamber of Commerce in Korea on several occasions to write and edit a book for foreign business and diplomatic families living in Seoul, I added three chapters written by a Korean-American, S.H. Jang, who operates an international business consulting firm in Seoul. He wrote about the "ten-commandments" of doing successful business with Koreans and 'What makes Koreans Tick'. In these he explains this

passive-aggressive behavior and the importance of face. Most importantly, many of the Western businessmen are learning that successful business deals are no longer on their terms any longer. They must learn some things about the culture of the Asians or other nationalities with whom they are dealing. So too, educators must learn some things about these growing minorities in U.S. schools and not expect the students and their families to adopt solely "American Ways" overnight (or ever).

With minority parents, if I feel that there may be some language problem, I will have follow-up reports or contracts typed so that they could better understand (or take time to understand) the implications. I might have a summary in their own language if possible, but the actual contract or agreement will be in English.

Many minority and immigrant parents, especially those from several Asian countries, will often nod their heads in agreement or that they understand, while not understanding at all, because it is a loss of face to not understand or to disagree. So do NOT take a verbal, "Yes, I understand," as fact. Ask them if they would like a interpreter (if one is available or if they want to bring one) or if they would feel better to have a brief summary of the meeting in their own language. Let them decide if it is necessary. Sometimes you can't win....they might feel insulted IF you ask such a question. You really need to feel them out.

With growing minorities in various school districts, especially on the West Coast, East Coast and Chicago areas, it is the responsibility of the administrators and teachers to learn something about those cultures. To just say, "They're in the U.S. now, so they better get used to American ways," will only cause frustration with the students, their parents and the school personnel. Keep communication written as much as possible so that they can have time to understand it or get someone to help them.

See the section on "Teachers Dealing With Difficult Parents" for some of the special 'pressures' that teachers have from Asian and minority parents.

Administrators Dealing With Difficult Students

There are shelves and shelves of books on discipline and dealing with difficult students in most university libraries, yet I find that this subject is one that is least dealt with in inservicing and staff development for administrators (and for teachers). Yet, teachers and administrators list this as one of their chief concerns (or time consumers) in poll after poll in many of the well-known journals and texts.

Most educational colleges give little or no time to disciplining procedures for administrative, masters or doctoral candidates.....someone up there assumes that, by now, they know it all. I refuse to believe this! This is the area through which I can often judge the morale of the staff and students. By looking at the methodologies used by administrators and the success and failure of them, I can judge the status of many other facets of the school.

I firmly believe that Hersey and Blanchard's theme of "Situational Leadership" really comes to life here. Each and every administrator must experiment with aspects of good practices used in effective schools' research and apply them as best suits the administrator's personality and style and the situation involving the student. I have gone from considering "discipline", or dealing with difficult students, as a real frustration, to one of an exciting challenge. The joy comes when a particular procedure has changed the behavior of a student on a somewhat consistent basis, or when a potentially volatile situation, turns out alright. This is one area where I steal, steal, steal ideas and procedures from the best principals I meet. I never, ever walk into a school without a pen and pad in my paw.

Before going into specifics there is some general advice for administrators in dealing with difficult students:

1. Listen, listen, listen and observe.
2. Don't be tempted to give long lectures.

3. Keep the procedure, penalty or contract simple.
4. Remain calm, but firm and assertive, if necessary.

The rule for teachers and administrators in general is to keep rules simple and few so everyone knows what is expected. ^PIn my second year as an assistant principal I presented my draft of our

K-12 School's first handbook to my friend and mentor, Dr. Tom Ellinger, then director/superintendent of DODDS Schools in Korea, for a review. He gave it back to me and gently, but directly told me that if I expected teachers, parents, and especially students, to remember all of those dozens of rules, I might as well not publish any of them. His advice to me and Dr. Harry Wong's advice to teachers, is to decide which (teachers maximum is 5, schoolwide might be 10) behaviors we can just not live with and feel that rules are necessary for them. Keep them general so that they don't back you in a corner. True, at last count, I had 12 or 13 in my handbook, but that's not bad for 14 years of trying to take his advice. The fewer there are, the fewer to remember.

Another preventive strategy for dealing with difficult students is to identify those students who are frequent offenders in each grade level. Ask teachers to identify those students who seem to be behaviorally at risk and have them explain why they think these students are at risk. With this age of computers, the principal should certainly utilize this to make his/her job easier. The secretary can periodically give a list of "trends" for a particular student off of the office computer. Do certain kinds of teachers frequently send this student? Do ALL teachers occasionally send this student? Does only one teacher frequently send this student? Are the referrals for similar reasons or a variety of reasons? With this information we can better plan an avenue of approach for the improvement of the behavior.

Resource Coordination Committee - A Form of Prevention

Many schools have found that forming something they might call a "Resource Coordination Committee" pays off in big

dividends. The committee consists of administrators, counselors, nurse, special education/resource personnel (and psychologist and admissions personnel if employed by the school). When teachers or personnel on the committee start to see the same student's name come up over and over for the same or different reasons, that might be the time to bring up the student at an R.C.C. meeting. These meetings are held at the same time each week and great importance is placed on attendance, which means that attendance is mandatory unless someone is involved in a real emergency. A teacher referral agent might also be invited. Interested personnel are also invited. After discussion of all aspects of the student and his life (both in and out of school) a plan of immediate action is decided upon and action people are designated. A follow-up report comes at the next meeting. Suspense dates are important for proper follow-up. This, more than any other form of counseling or individualized assistance has aided numerous students and prevented countless "blow-ups" or "difficult encounters" with students.

Buffer Zone

I mentioned at the beginning of this monograph my procedure of having a secretary give every student in upper elementary, middle school and high school, a sheet of paper with a few questions to be answered prior to me seeing the student who is either angry or who has been referred for something by a class teacher. Again, this does three things:

1. It provides a "buffer" so that the student (and the teacher) can calm down a little.
2. It gives the student a chance to reflect on the situation in a more realistic light. Most often, by the time a 4th through 8th grader finishes answering the questions, he or she has admitted to the "insolence" or wrong-doing, at least moderately.
3. It gives me (or the secretary) time to do a little research if it appears that the situation is quite serious.

Every student in the school knows that all 5 or 6 questions

must be answered completely and with no cynicism or facetiousness before I will see him or her. If the incident seems to be quite serious, I might even talk to a student or two, in confidence, about it prior to meeting with the student in question. Students can cry "injustice" all day, but when they hear that their own classmates were pretty disturbed by a classroom incident, they usually become a little more receptive to advice or penalties.

Listen and Observe Body Language

I always let the student talk his or her way completely through a situation before any discussion begins. If they wander from the subject, I will get them back on track though. I try not to let them bring in a laundry bag of previous incidents with the same teacher as justification for their unacceptable behaviors. I, in turn, will try to deal with that incident, at least initially. Trends are important for reflective thinking on the part of the student. I only interrupt to try to get the student to lower the voice or to stop using profanities and to present the case in as calm a manner as possible. I will let them sit outside for a while longer if they need more time to collect themselves. After all, they will do no one any good to be quickly returned to a classroom if they are emotionally distraught.

I look for body language and I lead with body language to let the student know he or she has my attention. My main goal will be to get the student to admit the wrongdoing and state how he or she could have better dealt with the situation. We often discuss injustices and acceptable ways to express anger. I will often suggest that the student see the counselor prior to bestowing any penalties or contracts. It gives the administrator a little more breathing space also. Active listening (and a little note taking) will usually give many indicators as to the true nature of the problem. If the situation is not the norm for this particular student, then a few questions about the home life, other problems might be revealing and appropriate. If the administrator and the counselor have an excellent working

relationship, the counselor can often advise the principal, without breaking confidentiality, that there is, in fact, a serious problem outside of the class. This doesn't excuse the improper behavior, but the administrator can now center in on a new foundation to improve the behavior or prevent it from happening again.

Calm and Collected Responses

There are many incidents in which the administrator who is dealing with a difficult student would like to take the student and shake him or her because nothing else seems to be getting through to him or her. Maintaining a very calm and collected attitude will often produce calm (or calmer) behavior in the student. Of course, the administrator must raise the voice volume if the student is getting verbally abusive or loud, but a quick return to a calm attitude and voice will usually produce good results in getting to the bottom of the situation.

The "Jumping Monkey" Again

When the student is obviously experiencing serious problems on several different "fronts" it is often tempting to let one or two of his or her "monkeys" jump onto our back. The student's problems will not disappear and it is the job of the administrator and counselor (and teachers in many cases) to help the student to find options for solving the problems. As in dealing with "difficult teachers" attacking one problem at a time may be better than to attempt an eraser of all of them at once. The student is probably incapable of solving all of them at once anyway. For the counselor or administrator to "take" the problem (or monkey) from the student is probably not going to completely eradicate it.

In researching and observing effective principals over the past 15 years, I have come to the firm belief that many of the best techniques utilized by administrators are "counseling techniques" and many of the most effective principals in dealing with difficult students are former counselors. Does that say

something important?

Contractual Discipline - Keep It Simple

Without going into the details of Glasser's Reality Therapy or Disciplining with Dignity or other trendy methods being utilized today, I might add some basic rules for contractual-type disciplining.

1. Keep it clear, concise and to the point. (Keeping it very simple helps the student, his/her parent and teachers understand exactly what is expected.) (KISS - Keep It Simple Stupid!)

2. Always have a reasonable time period. (This can be changed or extended later) The student must be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

3. The penalties of behavior outlined in the contract should have the capability of being successfully performed by the student in question.

4. All parties involved (and parents in many cases) should sign and have a copy of the contract. The student should be called in and asked to destroy the contract when successfully completed (and the parents should be notified and congratulated for their part.)

Contracts are for success, not for failure. In the most difficult cases, a shorter period with smaller, defined actions may be appropriate with a stipulation that another, less severe contract will follow if successfully completed. The next contract may be for a longer period of time with less severe penalties. Remember, you can't expect miracles and you need to produce success incrementally. It is also worth the time and effort, especially in serious cases, to find some reasons for seeing the student in the halls or cafeteria to check on how things are going (from his or her perspective) and to congratulate them on an especially good day or week or session. Administrators need to teach teachers these same strategies for dealing with difficult students and producing 'contracts-for-success'.

Deal-7 Teachers

Teachers Dealing With Difficult People → *Center*

Quite a number of teachers have said to me, "I wouldn't have your job for all the tea in China!" This was usually stated after a somewhat difficult parent, teacher or student left my office. I never feel that way. The success of dealing with a somewhat difficult person just makes my day. In helping teachers to be more productive in dealing with difficult people in the accomplishment of their tasks, administrators need to have ongoing inservicing and role modeling. Principals must share the abundant research and hands-on materials that are available in recent years with their faculty and staff personnel. NAESP, NASSP, PDK and many others are pumping out a considerable amount of material related to this subject.

I would strongly advise any teacher (or administrator) who is really interested in improving his or her skills in dealing with difficult people to read some of the popular best-sellers in the book stores, usually found under the subject headings of "business", concerning "leadership styles" of successful people in business. Certainly, Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* is the first one that comes to mind. Waterman's newest *The Renewal Factor* and certainly *Achieving Excellence in Our Schools* (by taking lessons from America's best-run companies) by James Lewis Jr. apply the successful use of effective managerial skills to educators' situations. These are good, applicable, suggested readings. I have heard teachers and administrators say, "We're schools, not businesses!" Yes, we are, but managerial and leadership skills cross over these boundaries quite nicely. ^

Dr. Harry Wong is one of the most sought-after speakers to educators (and organizations) about effectively dealing with people, especially, students, teachers and parents. He and his wife are both professional educators. They cover effective teaching and disciplining practices and also give numerous examples of leadership styles in business that can easily cross over into teaching. If you feel like you are getting into a rut

in teaching, write to the address in the bibliography for tapes and other information. He will "rev" you up again!

There are also a number of books listed in the bibliography that are usually categorized under psychology and 'wellness'. See Elgin, Olson, Lakein and Ringer. The Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale series are also applicable in learning how to deal with others in work and non-work times.

My hat is really off to devoted teachers. I hope we won't be singing, "Where have all the teachers gone? Long time....." due to budget cuts and lack of support by parents and other community members.

Most of the futures magazines ^{have} ~~predict~~ some poignant predictions that teachers and administrators need to look at closely. Yes, it's easy to say, "But that's the job of parents! We can't be expected to do EVERYTHING!" But, the futurists predict (and I think we're already seeing the trend) that by the year 2,000, more than 80% of the children will return from schools to empty homes for several reasons. The number of one-parent homes will increase substantially (and there will be considerably more single male households,) and when there are two parents, both, in many cases, will need to work in order to survive or will elect to work in order to live in a particular style. These are not necessarily "bad" parents. There just won't be any time for parents to do all of the things that traditionally educators felt should be done at home. Many will not have the skills to do them. So, like it or not, if educators expect certain norms and moral traits in society, more and more will fall on them. It's not impossible! I've watched the very best teachers integrate this into their lessons, into their style of teaching, into all of their dealings with parents and students.

For teachers the advice is very much the same as with administrators:

1. Use preventive maintenance;
2. Keep your rules few and simple;
3. Keep your classtime full, productive and variable and you

will have very little to worry about in the form of disciplinary measures, and lastly,

4. Keep lots of communication going home to parents.....and insure it IS getting there.
5. Be firm, but polite.

Teachers Dealing With Difficult Parents

As with administrators, a lot of the advice concerning effective dealings by teachers with parents has to do with "preventive maintenance". In general keeping lots of information going home AND insuring that it DOES get home can prevent parents getting only "part" of the story from their students. I think that, in general, elementary and most middle school teachers do this almost naturally. There is another "phenomonology" at work here. There is no administrator or teacher who will not agree that the percentage of school (or class) notices that successfully get into the hands of parents is commensurately reverse to the grade of the student. So, while nearly each and every student in the first grade will plop that notice or note into a parent's hand upon arrival home, it is unusual that more than a few notices will get into the hands of 12th graders' parents, if they, in fact, have the responsibility to take them home. Even when there is no "bad" or "privileged" information contained in them, this seems to be the case. Many public schools feel that the cost and time to mail notices home is paying off with the information getting into the intended hands.

This can be a productive lesson for teachers in trying to communicate with parents. When you see the potential for problems with a particular student or there is improvement or you want to follow up with a parent, you must insure that your information IS, in fact, getting to the parent. It can be mailed, and it might be worth calling the parent on the phone, even if it means an interruption at work. "Mrs. Spenser, I'm so sorry to interrupt you, but I just wanted to let you know that I am sending a note home with Greg concerning the status of our

special work in improving his study habits in U.S. History. Working together on this is certainly paying off (or will, hopefully, pay off in the end)."

I always tell teachers to make a copy of the note for backup and to require it to be signed by the parent. In especially difficult cases with ongoing problems, emotional, family problems or language problems, I suggest recruiting the help of a counselor, administrator, secretary or someone with language skills suitable for that situation.

I don't like to suspend students from school. I DO use ~~in-~~ in-school suspension on some occasions, but I refuse to take the proverbial and ultimate "monkey" from the parents' back to mine, if I am firmly convinced that the parent can help prevent a situation from turning into a disaster. There are many different ways of "forcing" a parent to participate. I have had teachers tell me that after several requests the parents still say they're too busy. I will send the student home, notify the parent that we have reached an impasse and until the parent can find the time to come to school, the child should remain home. No fingers are pointed, no judgements are made. This is one that must be carefully handled so as not to brush legalities or increase the problems of the students by increasing the anger of the parents. If legally, the child can not be kept home, then he or she might be placed in some kind of "alternative" program until the parent can come in to work out a joint program.

Teachers generally appreciate this effort. But, they should have exhausted all other efforts prior to getting to this point. So many of the cases of teachers dealing with difficult parents could have been prevented by the use of "prior communication" and a coordinated plan with the parent.

The Planned Parent-Conference

If I can find the time and the energy, certainly my ^{net} effort at some form of educational monograph will be in the form of Productive Parent-Teacher Conferences and it will be directed towards teachers AND parents. I've seen lots of generally good

information given by administrators to teachers prior to scheduled P-T Conference times or even at Teacher Orientation time, but I have seldom seen useful, positive advice given out to parents.....talk about preventive maintenance!@!@! Some of the most effective and successful teachers that I have observed over the years have done this even when the school administrators did not. With the age of computers, how easy and personally appropriate this can be:

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Lee:

As you know, we have scheduled Parent-Teacher Conferences in a few weeks. We can better utilize the little time we have by both doing the following: List any and all questions that you have concerning my program and your daughter Mi-Jin's progress. If you or your daughter have experienced any frustrations in doing the work of the course, following directions, homework assignments or projects, please feel free to discuss these at that time. If you want to send in some specific questions or concerns prior to the date of the conference so that I might research them for you, please feel free to do so.

It is important that we keep to the scheduled time so as to prevent other parents from being inconvenienced.

The intention of the conference is to ultimately help Mi-Jin succeed here at school. I certainly look forward to meeting you hat day and in working with you for your daughter's progress.

Sincerely,

Robert L. Larson
(Mi-Jin's World History Teacher)

What parent could deny the good intentions of a teacher in sending this kind of message. It is all positive! It says that we are trying to work together. It says that you are not perfect and lets clear up any misunderstandings. I can't imagine a parent coming into a planned conference in anger, if something like this went home about a week to 10 days early. Again, preventive maintenance!!

Then, FOR THE ACTUAL CONFERENCE, do your homework! It will

pay off. Again, with the computer age, this has become a considerably easier job for many teachers. It is simply amazing what some "teacher software" can do. It can highlight and maintain all of the trends that are important to parent-teacher conferencing. It can certainly personalize it so that you don't inadvertently disclose other students grades and efforts. You can also have small, information sheets that show (with no names) how this student fares in relation to the class, all other students in that grade, statewide, etc. You can show just major test grades, or trends that indicate that, while tests are satisfactory, homework is a problem, or tardiness. If you have it in print for the parent to analyze and for discussion with the child, there will be fewer chances of miscommunication.^{7P} How many parents go home and say to the child, "But, Mrs. O'Malley SAID you were lethargic and disinterested in classroom projects!" and the student is baffled because Mrs. O'Malley never told her (or so she says). I would strongly recommend that there be no surprises to the student as a result of a parent-teacher conference. I recommend privately telling students (or showing them the same printout you will use) what will go on with the parent-teacher conference. I do this especially in cases involving "difficult" students or "difficult" parents. This way we have eliminated at least 50% of the potentially "difficult parents".

BUT, how do teachers handle the angry or difficult parent who does come to planned conference sometimes with only the objective of antagonizing the teacher? As with the advice given to administrators, **don't internalize** the comments or "attack". If you suspect that a parent is going to come in in this emotional state, ask for assistance.....I always say that planning ahead is not just for Boy Scouts! Administrators should always leave as much time free for wandering around and being available for this type of involvement for the "protection" of teachers during parent-teacher conference times.

If a teacher is caught off guard and the unsuspecting and hostile parent comes in, there is nothing wrong with being as

pleasant as possible and having the parent sit down. If after a short period, it is evident that the parent came in with some pretty unshakable, preconceived notions that aren't going to create any productivity at that conference, and the anger of the parent is not going to lessen, the teacher can very calmly state that, "It is evident that the you feel very strongly about this issue and the short time we have today will not allow us to go into it in the detail that we should, so let's make another appointment to further discuss it. Quite possibly we should have the counselor (or an administrator) present who is aware of these problems."

If the parent only gets angrier and continues to "point the finger" or blame the teacher for all the ills of the child, and refuses to be put off, the teacher can very calmly state that the parent should please stay there for a moment, "Please excuse me for just a moment." The teacher then gets a counselor or administrator to sit in on the remainder of the conference. It might even be appropriate for the administrator or counselor to take the parent down to another office and let the teacher get on with the other conferences.

While never pleasant, one fact of teaching is dealing with what is often termed the "hostile" parent. It is sometimes unavoidable, but hopefully some of the pointers that follow will be useful. I first placed these in a little monograph for teachers and parents called Parent-Teacher Conference Guide prepared at the suggestion of Dr. Raymond Hatch of Michigan State University and later my professor at University of Southern California and the author of several articles and books on Pupil Personnel Services:

1. "Locking Horns" will produce no positive results.
2. Keep calm and listen (by listening, not just hearing, the parent will often give a solution to the problem without being aware of it. One small area of mutual understanding can arise which can be a starting point in discussing the problem.)
3. Questioning is always better than 'lecturing'.
4. If it is obvious that nothing positive can result due to the unfavorable atmosphere, suggest that the parent might like to

voice the complaint or problem to an administrator (or counselor) and then escort him/her to one of the administrators. Try your best to keep your emotions intact.

5. Consider some of the following phrases or comments in dealing with 'upset' parents;

a. "You must have stored up these feelings for a long time for them to come out so strongly."

b. "Many of us at school feel strongly about that situation and we're working to have it changed."

c. "I don't think it's going to be productive to talk today. Let's make another appointment for a time when we can both be productive." (The a, b, & c were suggested by Madeline Hunter and Gerda Lawrence in Parent-Teacher Conferencing, TIP Publications.)

While it may not be wholly appropriate here, I think that some of the suggestions for getting the proper momentum initiated at any parent-teacher conference might be worthwhile from a preventive standpoint. Even in the middle of a hostile or crisis situation, these are good suggestions made by Dr. Hatch:

1. Friendly atmosphere; start off with something positive about the child.

2. Reviewing student's records, listing problem areas and possible suggestions before the conference.

3. Give the impression that education is a partnership between the home and the school.

4. Develop listening abilities and learn to scrutinize information which may be valuable.

5. Do not 'talk down' to a parent as if you (the teacher) were the one and only authority on the child or as if the parent is the child.

6. Pass on the following types of observations about the child:

- A. Apparent strengths and weaknesses.
- B. Evidence of unusual aptitude.
- C. Scholastic Aptitude in relative terms.
- D. Interests or plans for future.
- E. Acceptance or rejection of responsibility.
- F. Ease in relating to others. 56
- G. Recent changes in behavior.
- H. Limitations resulting from possible health or other

handicapping circumstances.

Bruce Shertzer and Herman Peters, well-known writers of Guidance Techniques suggested the following 'Do's and Don'ts' for planning for a conference with parents:

- A. Don't jump to conclusions.
- B. Don't appear shocked at anything.
- C. Be truthful and honest.
- D. Respect the parents' confidence.
- E. Take what the parents say seriously.
- F. Don't be authoritative.
- G. Avoid getting into arguments.
- H. Let parents have plenty of opportunity to talk about what is concerning THEM.
- I. Be ready to speak honest admiration for what parents do.
- J. Avoid educational jargon and pedantic language.
- K. Let it be apparent that parents are not expected to do ALL the adjusting.
- L. Avoid getting into 'who's to blame' discussions.

Be sure to follow up on all promises made at the P-T Conference or you will set yourself up for another "difficult" time. Even if there is NO news, then send home a note or call the parent telling them that.

N.E.A. Professional Library at P.O. Box 509, West Haven, Connecticut, 06516 (1-800-229-4200) has quite an excellent list of filmstrips, pamphlets and books on Parent-Teacher Conferencing for very reasonable prices. Check them out and get your school office to order as many as possible.

~~Deal~~-B Teachers (2)

The Unplanned Drop-In of a Difficult Parent

Remember, there are some people who operate from an intimidation standpoint on purpose. Ringer's popular **Winning Through Intimidation** had several reprints in the mid-70's. I certainly recommend it for several reasons: NOT to learn how to be intimidating in these situations. That is not our job as educators. But, there are some good ideas in this small book. We can learn how some people operate in most difficult situations. We can get some ideas on how to act for the best results in dealing with intimidating people. He discusses brevity, lack of legal and complicated terminology and proper phrasing for psychological impact.

Again, the administrators can help considerably by "setting the rules" so that teachers are protected. This is very important. First of all, all parents should be required to check in at the front office or with a counselor or **SOMEWHERE** before being allowed to just go straight in to see a teacher without an appointment. Many schools have personnel near the front door as a check. If the administrator or the administrative secretary sees that the parent is very upset, then immediate action should be taken to prevent the parent from seeing the teacher in that condition. Think about it? This confrontation can affect several hundred students and other teachers if allowed to go ahead unchecked.

But, we all know that a number of "hostile", angry or upset parents are going to get around all checks and barriers and show up at your doorstep unannounced. **How can we most effectively handle it?** First of all, if you have a class in session, you need to put on your broadest smile and tell the parent firmly, but diplomatically that it is inappropriate to discuss the problem right now. Maybe they would like to go to the office and wait until _____ o'clock when you have some free time or they might like to discuss it with one of the administrators in the office since you are not free just then. This may be the most

difficult lesson in self-discipline of your career! We'd all like to tell them that we have responsibilities to ALL of the students and since they came in unannounced, it is not appropriate for you to leave your class unattended at this time....but, we have to curb the anger, not increase it. Be calm, be pleasant (yet firm,) and give some exact time that the parent CAN meet with you.

Yes, yes!! We all know that there is at least one (if not more cases) a year whereby the parent is not going to budge. He or she came all the way into school to see you about a perceived serious problem and they're not going to leave without getting some satisfaction. Again, remember that something pretty serious must be perceived by them to make them come in like this. It probably IS best to clear the air, but not there. If they insist on staying put, or in some cases, they just plop themselves down inside the classroom to wait it out, there are a few options. One, I would write a simple note to an administrator saying only, "I have a "hostile" parent in my room who won't leave.....help!" and send the most trusted student with it to the office. Two, if things are really quite disturbing to the atmosphere of the class or for the students, I'd smile, ask the parent to accompany you to the office, out of range of the students and guide him or her to one of the administrators offices. It will usually do the job....but, always maintain the air of a professional and of decorum.....as difficult as it may be. Do NOT put on a frown or a pouting mouth. A smile and a soft voice can disarm the worst violators of etiquette and professionalism.

And, there is even an occasional situation whereby, the teacher is being confronted with a barrage of verbal assaults and condemnations for a variety of things. There are even some cases whereby a parent walks right into the room and begins the verbal attack. This is the most difficult situation and calls for enormous self-control. Keep in mind. Again, the parent has heard only 50% of some story. Do your best to guide the parent at least out into the hallway so that you can get away from the students. Ask the parent firmly, but politely to lower his or 57

her voice so as to not disturb other classrooms and please accompany you to the office. Nothing more needs to be said. Do not defend yourself in an open classroom or in the hallway!

If a parent corners you inside or outside of the building and "escape" is unlikely or improbable, you will need to try some of the administrator's or counselor's techniques: Listen, listen, listen; don't internalize or emotionalize, repeat back to the parent some of the things that he or she has stated saying that they must feel very strongly to have come in like this to talk about this concern. This is the "stuff" of active listening. Ask your principal for a copy of NASSP's April 1991 Tips for Principals - How to Use Listening Skills To Be a More Effective Administrator. These are concise (on a two-page card) and appropriate for everyone in schools. There is also a list of 9 techniques for "Directed Listening".....learn them. They are listed at the end of this section.

In the worst cases, just let them run out of steam. It may be the only way in the extreme cases. Don't feel that you have to give an answer to their concern right there on the spot. Tell them you will look into the problem and get back to them (give an exact date and time, if possible) by tomorrow afternoon, or ask them to come in again (after school?) so that you will have more time to devote to discussion of the problem. At least let them know that you take them seriously (even if they may have failed to observe etiquette and professional decorum).

Teachers and Difficult Parents at Open House or Open Meetings

Everyone in education knows the difficulty of trying to "play the room" and mingle with all of the parents at an Open House or at an informal (or formal) open meeting only to be sidetracked and put on the spot to deal with a personal gripe, problem or concern of a particular parent. The concern may be legitimate, but you can't let yourself be forced into giving all of your time to this one person. Good administrators will give their teachers some standard sayings to use in these situations.

"I can see that this is a real concern for you Mrs. Stacey, but unfortunately right now is not the time for us to discuss this because I have a responsibility to meet and talk with all of the parents in this room. Why don't we set up a time for next week for us to meet and discuss this without all of these distractions?"

The most effective teachers and principals will again use "preventive" measures. They will send home a notice explaining what the Open House IS and what it ISN'T. It will state that this is NOT the time to bring up personal problems and concerns. However, they might be able to set up a time to meet the teacher to discuss those other concerns. If there is a meeting prior to parents going to separate classrooms, say by the principal, (in order to introduce the various teachers and specials teachers,) the principal can state that the Open House is intended to give a feeling for what goes on in the classroom and to meet and get to know the teacher. Unfortunately, the teachers do not have the time tonight to meet individually with parents to discuss their personal concerns and problems.

Again, the most effective principals wander the halls and look in on teachers and try to spot those who seem to be backed into a corner with their time being occupied by one parent with a problem. Then, they can try to get the teacher off of the hook. Teachers in adjacent rooms sometimes "team up" with each other and poke a head in occasionally to see if they need to be extracted from an unpleasant situation. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need Mrs. Wasuck next door for a minute."

Some seasoned veterans have given up on informal, mingle around the classroom Open House times. They have a planned agendas and give talks about the curriculum and the rules of the class and possibly some of the highlights of the semester. By the time they finish, there is little time for one parent to intringe upon all of their time. Middle and high schools that have time schedules for parents to meet each teacher and hear a short talk will have little chance of problems. Elementary teachers and middle/high school teachers that are supposed to be in the room for an extended period of time for parents to drop in

will be in a more vulnerable position for dealing with the difficult parent. Some schools set them up that way and so there is little that can be done about it.

Teachers and the Difficult Parent Out in the Community

Very often educators, teachers and administrators, are confronted in a supermarket, at church, in a movie theater or wherever by a parent who will seize the moment to get something off his or her chest. Generally, the parent will not be abusive, because he or she has also been caught off guard by the chance meeting. This should be one of the easier times to extract oneself from the difficult situation with a minimum of pain.

My family members all know that if I am confronted in a public place by a parent who wants to discuss a school problem, I will inevitably state that we are running late and why don't we make a time to discuss this next week. "Call me at ____ O'Clock on _____ day." My children are so attuned to this that they will sometimes say, "Come on Dad, we're going to be late!" We've grown accustomed to the various meanings of terms and phrases that border on being mistruths.....but, not exactly. There should probably be a support group for "children of educators".

Teachers Dealing with Minority and Asian Parents

We have an increasing number of parents who speak little English or come from recently blossoming minority groups such as Asians and Hispanics. If the number of those students is increasing in the school or in your classroom, then it is the responsibility of the teachers and administrators to do some "homework" on the culture of these increasing numbers of a particular nationality. The advice about watching the tone of voice, the kinds of words and the referral to counseling that I gave to administrators certainly applies for teachers. You should read that section for some specific ideas.

Ask the child if the parent speaks good English or maybe will feel better with an interpreter if a meeting is necessary. Teachers often perceive "second language parents" to be

unconcerned with the education of their children, when, in effect, it is language and culture that are keeping the parent at bay.

Dr. Esther Lee Yao, associate professor of multicultural education at the University of Houston - Clear Lake, wrote a very poignant article in the November 1988 issue of the Phi Delta KAPPAN called "Working Effectively with Asian Immigrant Parents". I refer to this article in all talks on "Dealing With Difficult People" because it is appropriate for most minority groups of parents and how educators should deal with them. The Asian parent, especially if newly arrived, will often want more homework for the child, more time-on-task, no "frilly classes" such as home economics, and will sometimes insist that the teacher use corporal punishment to deal with any misbehavior. They also embellish the teacher and administrative staff with gifts galore. Don't panic! AND, don't be judgemental about the demands of the parents. These Asian nations did not have economic surges overnight by sitting on their laurels. We may disagree with the parents' methodologies completely but we need to follow basic parent-teacher conference tactics: **Don't look or act shocked at any suggestion.** Choose your words carefully. As I mentioned in the administrators' section, a misused term or word could cause untold consequences for the child. Dr. Yao suggests substituting "unfamiliar with American Customs" for "rude", "reserved" for "passive" and "disinterested" for "lazy". The mere mention or suggestion of the parent obtaining the services of a psychiatrist or psychologist should be avoided. If the suggestion is appropriate, let the school professionals do it and they should speak in general terms such as suggesting the search of an outside professional or professional counselor.

The other problem that Dr. Yao brings up and one that I have observed over and over again during my years in international schools in Asia is the fact that some minority parents have such high ideals and plans for their children that, "they overlook or deny physical, mental, or social limitations." It is certainly not unusual for the parent of a second grader to casually mention

to the teacher that "Akiko will be a surgical doctor someday," or even more often for a middle or high school parent to insist that, "Jae Hoon will be going to Harvard," when it is obvious to the administration, faculty (and maybe even to Jae Hoon) that he does not have the qualities that Harvard is seeking for applicant candidates. These cases must be dealt with with great sensitivity and diplomacy. Very often the counselor will need to be brought into the picture if the parent is not facing the reality of the real world limitations faced by a particular minority child.

The subject of "gifts" should be briefly mentioned due to the widespread custom of giving gifts and envelopes of money to educators in many Asian countries. American teachers usually look upon these as "straight, out-and-out bribes" but they are NOT that at all. Some schools with large Asian contingents have had to publically notify parents that "cash gifts" at any time during the year is inappropriate and teachers have been told that they may not accept them for any reason. (Rucci, P.) It is not unusual for an administrator or a teacher, at the end of a day of conferences, to find a blank, white envelope with a sizable amount of cash inside, under a blotter or on the desk under some papers or near the teacher's personal belongings. Some schools have told parents that if they wish to give gifts to the educators in the school, the time period just after grades are published is more appropriate than before. What the Asian parent is saying with the gift is: "This isn't a bribe, and you don't have to give my child anything he or she doesn't deserve, but.....just give him/her a little T.L.C. and consideration during the semester." Sometimes the parent feels inadequate BECAUSE of the language barrier and will hope that the cultural obligation to follow up on the child's education is somewhat fulfilled by the giving of a gift. As a teacher you may just have to answer that, "We don't (or can't) do that in the American Public School system." No shock, no criticism. When a teacher finds himself or herself in a difficult situation whereby the parent absolutely refuses to accept back the gift or it is very

evident that the return of the gift will cause considerable loss of face, he or she can follow it up the next day with a statement about the school's (or your) policy on gifts and, while you appreciate the thought, you have decided to donate it to _____ organization. Again, thank them for the thought. I continue to be amazed at the insensitivity to this cultural idiosyncrasy that many teachers express. It must be our own cultural distaste for "bribe-taking" and "bribe-giving". Dr. Paul Crane, a medical doctor and missionary in Korea a number of years back, did a section in his book, **Korean Patterns** on this subject. S.H. Jang, the American-Korean business consultant I mentioned previously, has also written about this subject of gift-giving. It is a difficult one to tackle. Every now and then though, the word gets around that a particular teacher in a particular school DID, in fact, accept a sizable "gift" (say \$500) from a concerned Asian or minority parent and this DOES border on "bribe taking".

Involving parents of burgeoning cultural, minority groups in parent groups has its payoffs. Parent Advisory Councils, PTO's or other groups can reveal where their priorities are coming from and what their expectations are for their children.

Teachers Dealing with Other Teachers

Probably every educator has experienced or at least observed one teacher blowing his or her top at another teacher for some apparent and flagrant violation of some rules or procedures that put them out a little. Anger can not be met with anger and to return blame with blame will only further inflame the situation. As uncomfortable as these occasional situations might be, we have to learn to wait them out.

If it is done in a public place, you need to pull the person into a private corner somewhere and firmly, but without emotion, tell him or her that it's inappropriate to publically confront you. "Let's go somewhere where we can discuss this." or at least set an exact time and place where a meeting can take place. As

with "hostile" parents, we have to bite our tongues even if the person is accusatory and very angry.

There is nothing more unsettling for the faculty and students than two professionals who are acting unprofessional in public. You will gain the respect of the students and the other faculty members if YOU meet this unprofessionalism with quiet, calm professional, behavior, even if the person's accusation is correct. These types of confrontations between teachers most often happen in the teachers' lounge or outside a classroom. Don't let yourself be "sucked" into the vortex of anger. Avoid, avoid, avoid at all costs striking back on the spot.

Once you are both in an appropriate place you can deal with the situation much the same as you would for a "difficult parent". Again, active or direct listening can often disarm the angry confronter. Restate the problem as you think you've heard it. Here, you are verbalizing your perception of what was said. Encourage the person to elaborate on and clarify the specific points of the problem. Restate the problem in clear terms if necessary so that both parties are ready to understand and search out solutions or alternatives.

Teachers Dealing With Difficult Administrators

This is the topic that is most often brought up at talks with teachers. Many teachers take the attitude that "they're damned if they do, damned if they don't!" No matter what they do in handling a situation involving a difficult administrator, they seem to lose. This does not have to be the case all of the time, or even most of the time.

I tell new teachers (to the school) during orientations that they need to learn the culture of the school and the culture of the chief administrators before attempting to get involved in any negotiation or conflict. They don't have to agree with the culture, they just have to know it if they want to be effective in dealing with that person.

My personal bias that I take to the job everyday is that I can't stand chronic complainers and malcontents, especially those

who constantly complain, but offer no solutions to grievances. I believe that my mentors have been the same. Teachers who know this about me and my boss can sometimes get the seemingly impossible as easy as cutting through soft butter with a hot knife. Those who come in and speak calmly, have a brief, written synopsis of the problem and some alternatives for proposals, might go away with an instant solution.

Let's face it. There ARE some incompetant or marginal administrators who will not change and all efforts to improve their methods of dealing with people are futile. But, that doesn't mean that we have to just accept their unprofessional ways. When I deal with this subject, I often see in my mind's eye a film I have viewed several times, put out by Houghton-Mifflin Publishers called **Dealing With Difficult People**. It is a classic. Although it doesn't hone in on educators' problems in dealing with difficult people, we can see most of the usual cases of supervisor-subordinates and the case studies are similar to what we can experience in schools.

The film is memorable because it shows people attempting various strategies, many of which have been mentioned here, but it also shows the cases where nothing will change the supervisor's methodology. This is especially true in cases where traditional top-down, non-participatory, decision-making is taking place. The boss only verbalizes accusations, but never clarifies his or her intentions or instructions and seldom, if ever, compliments a job well-done. I have dealt with these kinds of bosses before and I agree with the film.....Sometimes we can use all of the tools of the trade at our disposal and the boss will NOT change his or her style. Where do we go from there, you ask? **We learn to cope!** The teacher can become the real professional and leader by utilizing some of the active listening techniques noted previously. **Make** the boss repeat himself, **make** the boss clarify exactly what is bothering him. **Tell** him how you feel when he yells or chastises in public. **Interrupt** him when his voice is getting too loud and calmly tell him that you could get a lot more out of this meeting if he would just lower his

voice a little. Repeat what you thought you heard him say. Keep calm, but you can be a little assertive if necessary. But, assertive does not equal angry. Try to remember that.

Gerald Piaget and Barbara Binkley have done research and produced a tape for Psychology Today called Dealing With Difficult People. In it they discuss several cases and do a lot of role modeling. One of the most applicable to this section is the part on equalizing the situation. I love this concept because it is so Asian. In fact they state that many of their solutions ARE in fact from Asian concepts. The idea of restoring the balance is one that I have used for a long time.

When a student has been sent out of a classroom for insolence or the like and we have completed the conference (between administrator and student) my last words will always be, "O.K., we've solved the immediate problem and you understand what the penalties are going to be. Now, what can YOU do to restore the balance in the relationship between Mr. Rountree and you?" The student can not depart until a viable plan is proposed.

In equalizing the situation, you are restoring the balance that, for whatever reason, has been put out of kilter. You may think that that is the job of the administrator, but, it might just not happen, so get on with it. You may have to become a little more assertive, but, again, assertive doesn't mean angry. Assertive doesn't mean insolent. You may, in fact, HAVE to raise your voice a little to get his or her attention, then try some of the active listening techniques, forcing the boss to answer and to be confronted with reality of his or her behavior. Don't put them down though.

Another Asian concept which has been the maker or breaker of many deals between American businessmen and their Asian counterpart is the art of face saving. I have heard American businessmen shout in frustration, "I'm tired of all this tippy-toeing around to save face. From now on we do things the American way!!" There are fewer and fewer of those kinds of businessmen doing successful business with Asians nowadays. What's wrong with ~~6~~ permitting the accuser or the violator of

etiquette or professional practices from having an out....to save face? If it gets the job done, so what? This is difficult for most Americans swallow, because we live on principle and will die for it....or so it seems in most of our negotiations with others. There are, however, times when it just isn't worth it.

If the boss is accusing you of doing (or not doing) something unjustly and no amount of explaining will convince him or her otherwise, drop the issue for the time being. Maybe someone else observed the situation and can explain it to the boss. Maybe you can invite him to observe the opposite behavior of what he accused you. You might even state that you can see how he might have perceived a wrong-doing, but you had only good intentions at heart. "I'll try to avoid having these misperceptions arise in the future." You have not admitted to anything. You've only acknowledged that the boss may have perceived wrongly something that involved you. You are giving him a way out...to save face. It's a valuable lesson that we can all learn from the Korean, Japanese and Chinese businessmen and women. They are pros at it. Many books on doing business with Japanese, Koreans and Taiwan Chinese go into this subject in great detail. Even when you realize that the boss is dead wrong, by providing a chance for face-saving, we have equalized the situation. You, the teacher, then are the real professional, and the boss.....well, he or she has something to learn.....and maybe just did, from you.

Teachers Dealing With Difficult Students

Certainly, shelves and shelves of books have been written on discipline and classroom management. It is certainly not the intention of this book to cover all of the many facets of those topics. But, as with the other situational approaches to dealing with difficult people, dealing with difficult students can be prevented in many and most cases.

Dr. Harry Wong is a master of this subject. I've mentioned him several times in this book. He has several tapes available at the address indicated in the bibliography. Nothing he says is

really very new. He admits that! He just puts it altogether in a nice, neat package of "stolen goodies". Like me, he has stolen all of his ideas from effective teachers and principals and businessmen around the world. So simple, yet so effective!

Preventive Measures in Dealing With Difficult Students

Some of the preventive measures for dealing with difficult students can be quoted directly from Dr. Harry Wong's sheet that he passes out at educators' workshops called Summary of Major Concepts Covered By Harry K. Wong:

- * Start class and each assignment immediately.
- * Have the room environment ready for instruction.
- * Discipline: Set rules, penalties, and rewards immediately.
- * Position yourself in the room near the students; problems are proportional to distance.
- * The disciplined student is taught by a teacher with high control of the class and high support for the students.
- * Dress in a professional manner to model and expect achievement.
- * The greater the structure of a lesson and the more precise the directions on task procedures, the lower the error rate and the higher the achievement rate.
- * Call each home within two weeks. Teachers + Parents = Good Students.
- * Determine the learning style of your students.
- * The successful teacher practices enhancement activities, not survival or protective activities.

These are just a few of his 60 concepts involving effective teaching practices. But, in his tapes and workshops, Dr. Wong elaborates on classroom management procedures being the foundation that must be present prior to practicing good teaching techniques. The two can feed off of each other eventually.

He says that according to the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education at the University of Texas, there are five ways to manage an effective classroom. "Well established procedures help eliminate wasted time....Do not begin the year yelling and screaming. And never yell and scream. Develop a technique to get their attention or to get to work. Drill this technique into the class from the very first moment. And keep calm while you teach and drill this routine. They will

appreciate the freedom from stressful yelling as much as you will."

He says in his tapes that rules must be concise and few in number. What are the three or four rules that you just can not exist without?

He also states that effective teachers, "...spend a good deal of time the first weeks of the school year introducing and teaching students rules and procedures." It may take some time before they are learned and understood, especially in the case of elementary children.

In dealing with inappropriate behavior in the classroom, he says to deal with it when it first occurs and deal with it calmly, quickly, and without disrupting the flow of the lesson. "Some ways of dealing with inappropriate behavior include:

- * Give the student "The Look".
- * Remind the student of the correct rule or procedure.
- * Ask the student to repeat the correct rule or procedure.
- * Tell the student to stop the rule violation.

* Tell the student to stop the rule violation and attach a consequence. He has an entire tape devoted to how teachers can eliminate all disciplinary interruptions to their lessons. He has advice on groupings and how to control behavior in groups. His topics are mostly in the realm of preventive strategies, but he does discuss the direct confrontation. They all seem pretty simple, don't they?

Teachers Dealing with the Unexpected Situation With Students

I'm convinced, like Harry Wong, that there are not really very many completely unexpected, discomforting situations involving students in classroom. Teachers who do their homework will have more tools at their disposal. A perusal of student records and other available information will shed new light on why a student acts the way he does. A talk with counselors and some of the previous teachers (especially in elementary classes) can build a background of knowledge of what might be expected. Some teachers say they don't want to start out with preconceived

ideas on any student and would rather wait before delving into the student's past. Sometimes they are right, especially if there was a student-teacher conflict or evidence of a marginal or incompetent teacher. Usually however, doing a little research on each and every student will give the teacher a headstart on how to more effectively deal with the difficult student. This must be done in accordance with local, state and federal constraints on privileged information though.

I want to know everything about the student. I want to know if the parents are cooperative and what kind of family life the student has if it is appropriate. In other words I want to know the reasons for this student being difficult even before he has a chance to be difficult. By having this information on hand, maybe I can "disarm" the difficult student even before the difficulty arises. If the student blew his top in class and I knew that he was being abused at home or was being ignored by his parents or his parents were in the process of divorce or whatever, it might make a world of difference how I reacted and how I chose to handle the problem. Again, this goes with Hersey's and Blanchard's situational leadership theme. We can be consistent but in different ways depending on the "readiness level" of the person with whom we are dealing.

A conference by the teacher with the counselor or administrator to see if other teachers are experiencing the same types of behavior would be appropriate. If the school has a sort of Resource Coordination Committee as we have in our school, repeated problems with the same student could result in referral to this committee made up of administrators, nurse, counselor and special education resource personnel for discussion and assignment of tasks for improving the situation. Constant communication with the referring teacher is very important for the most effective outcome.

But, what do we do when a student does blow his top or goes off the deep end? Depending on the situation and the student, it may be worth the time to calmly, but firmly (and assertively) have the student step outside the room and to explain how

inappropriate his/her behavior is. In no situation should you match anger with anger. Sometimes you, or your classroom, is just the catalyst.....very often outbursts of anger are really **misplaced aggression**. The students are angry at something totally unrelated. This is where a situational approach is very appropriate. If the student's anger has been building and there is a real conflict being established between the teacher and the student, then it may be better handled by someone else. I would ask the student to accompany you outside the room and then I would firmly and assertively tell him that his behavior has been inappropriate. Depending upon your own methods and the rules of the school, you can accompany him to a "time out area," a counselor, or to the principal's office. **Never send a disruptive student to a principal's office with no kind of communication.** It only delays the procedures and may render ineffective the office procedures. If a student is sent down to the office, always have another student go with him to insure that he gets there. Always make sure that some kind of note accompanies him or her. If there is an intercom, then inform someone in the office that the student is being sent down for insolence (or whatever) and you will follow up as soon as the class is over. Keep calm and steady even though you feel like you'd like to scream.

Another method with 5th - 12 graders might be the method utilized by the administrator section referred to as the creation of a **"buffer sheet"**. What that does is gives all parties a chance to calm down before irreparable damage is done. The student is given a sheet which the teacher carries in his or her desk with some questions that must be answered with no cynicism or facetiousness before deciding how to proceed in some kind of disciplinary procedure.

With elementary and middle school students, the result is usually that the student admits the wrongdoing by the time he or she finishes answering the 5 or 6 questions. Some of the questions might be:

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1. What exactly led up to the incident that resulted in
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being evicted from the classroom?

2. Who else was involved in the incident?

3. What could I have done to prevent the situation from turning out the way it did?

or 4. If I had a chance to relive this situation that led up to the incident again, how would I NOW handle it?

5. What part of the blame do I have in this situation?

6. What can I do now to restore the balance with the parties involved and the teacher?

The questions MUST be answered before moving on to the next step of the process. Again, elementary and middle school students want to get on with their lives and get back to normalcy so they usually admit wrongdoing. It is not so easy for high school students but the form has still done something positive: It has hopefully calmed the student down somewhat and has prevented a yelling match between the teacher and the student. Yes, we all know that some students will answer the questions according to how they think we want them to answer, but a little manipulation can go a long way. We can not look at incidents out of context with the real world of the student (and the teacher).

If we are to be effective educators, we must look past the painful incident and look at our own lives and that of the students. You might ask yourself, "Am I having more of these types of incidents than usual?" "Is there something in my personal or professional life that is affecting my teaching strategies?" There is no shame in seeking help from a counselor, administrator or, especially from peers.

I can not stress enough the benefits that can be achieved from teachers visiting other teachers' rooms, especially teachers who are known throughout the school as "master teachers". Some are better with management practices. Ask that teacher if you can visit her room to view her or him. It is time very worthwhile spent. So much can be learned. Maybe that teacher's style is quite different from yours, but there will be something to experiment with in your own classroom.

In a few cases, as an administrator, I have agreed with some teachers who wanted to observe a particularly "difficult student" in another teacher's classroom if the other teacher agreed. As an administrator, I have often done this myself....especially if the behavior was similar in several classrooms or if the student had adequate behavior in some classes and not in others. I praise those teachers who do this kind of "homework".

Teachers Dealing With the Hostile Student

Dr. Harry Wong and his wife, Dr. Rosemary Tripi, have considerable insight into prevention of situations involving hostile students. We've heard it all many times. Get to work! Get to work! Get to work! Time on task! Time on task! Time on Task! Let them know the rules (and keep them few) early on. Most incidents will be prevented by this thinking and acting. There's no doubt about it! But, what kinds of things can we do with the one student who is not going to leave the room, who has suddenly forsaken all consequences for his or her behavior and is on the verge of going beserk (or is in the process of doing that)? We have to realize several things:

1. This could be dangerous for you, the teacher and for the other students.

2. Anger (on the part of the student) met with anger (on the part of the teacher) will only further inflame the passionate fires. It can produce no good results. It does NOT mean that the teacher shouldn't be FIRM and ASSERTIVE. The teacher most certainly should be that. Give them a way out for the time being. "Stephanie, I don't want you to have to regret your actions, so please quietly leave the room and we'll handle this situation outside the classroom."

As we get further up the ladder of high school students, there are more occasions whereby the student will refuse to leave....often it is because it won't be cool to do so.

When the time and situation appear to be heading towards an out-of-control situation, the teacher needs to do one of two things depending on the particular situation and potential for

danger. He or she can leave the room (if there is no intercom) and get an administrator. I would advise NOT leaving the room except in the most exceptional cases. I would, as calmly as possible, write a note stating that you have student who is going out of control and you need a little help. Send one of the trusted students to the office with it. When these incidents are over, or put into someone else's hands for the time being, it is most important to try to get yourself back to normal. Think about it, now, instead of only two people losing teaching and learning time, the entire class is very upset, regardless of who is to blame. There are some schools of thought that the teacher should discuss what just happened with the class. I disagree in almost all cases. First of all, by doing that, we then put ourselves in the position to judge the outcome of the situation and we're really not ready to do that. It does no good to carry on the intense feelings that may have been built up. You also take the chance of bringing up private matters in the class where they do not belong. I firmly believe that the teacher can make all the difference in the world. "Well, I'm always sorry for that kind of incident, but we've got to move on now." and as difficult as it may be to do, try to smile and help to create some semblance of normalcy in the room. NEVER, never let a classroom confrontation with a student go beyond one sentence or two. Right or wrong, you are setting yourself up for disaster.

Remove the thorn or the impediment to learning. I love the time out areas that elementary and some middle school teachers have right in the room. It is so appropriate. things don't have to get blown out of proportion then. The student knows that his wrongdoing will not go unchallenged or with no penalties, but he or she also knows that the price can usually be paid quickly and then they can move on with their lives.

Deal-9 - Conclusion

Conclusion

Whenever I give a workshop to teachers and administrators on the subject of "Dealing With Difficult People" I usually pass out a list of general Do's & Don't's to observe when in those touchy and often unexpected situations. Even after reading thousands of pages of articles and books and listening to tapes and watching videos and movies on related subjects, I have really NOT changed my list that very much over the past 6 years. Since this effort included administrators and teachers in their associations with adults and children, some of them are appropriate for only dealing with adults and some only for children. They are important! I would xerox them and hang them on the wall in a place where I would tend to conveniently look when dealing with a difficult person in my room or office. If you have other suggestions, please feel free to send them to the publisher so that I might consider them for future revisions of this effort. It is appropriate to end with a statement about your energy and time. You only have so much of them to spread around the school so don't waste them. You need to estimate the person and the situation. Do I (or the organization) have to be afraid of this person or this situation? Can they do me (or the organization) significant harm? If the answer is pretty much "No," then I would consider ignoring them or giving them the least bit of my time and energy. (Elgin in her book, *The Gentle Art...*, P. 244)

If I could put all of this advice into just three or four words, I'd say: LISTEN, Remain Calm, don't rush to make decisions.

In a nut shell:

1. Remain Calm & Cool (or at least, give that appearance.)
2. Listen, listen, listen (Use active, or direct, listening techniques).
3. Low, but firm (or assertive) voice (Being assertive does not necessarily mean being angry.)

4. Don't Patronize, but Sincerely Compliment (especially adults).

5. Don't Intimidate and don't be intimidated.

6. Friendly, reassuring greeting (adults, especially parents).

7. Repeat or reframe the concern and DON'T rush to make decisions.

8. Discuss, negotiate and compromise only when both sides are calm.

9. Don't be afraid to seek assistance.

10. DON'T BLOW YOUR TOP!!

NASSP published an excellent booklet called John Gardner on Leadership in the Spring of 1991. One of the quotable quotes is that, "There is more to face-to-face communication than the verbal component. The leader's style, timing, and symbolic acts all carry messages ---and demonstrate that messages are being received. Words and sentences, tone of voice, body language, facial expression, timing, unfinished sentences, silences ---all contribute to a multi-level dialog." (P. 16)

One other important idea is that, "One of the most important prerequisites for trust in a leader is steadiness. A leader who is inconsistent and unpredictable poses a nerve-wracking problem for followers." (P. 16) Gardner says that leaders, "...create a climate in which there is pride in making significant contributions to shared goals." This is exactly what I intended with this monograph. Shared attempts at productive communication will prevent or at least lessen the impact in dealing with difficult people.

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